

# NSPCC

## **Solution-focused practice**

**A toolkit for working  
with children  
and young people**

**EVERY CHILDHOOD IS WORTH FIGHTING FOR**

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# Introduction

## Solution-focused practice with children

Solution-focused practice was originally developed in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s by a group of people including Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg (Shennan, 2014). From the beginning, this approach has been used with children and young people as well as adults, and a variety of books have been written about its specific use with children (for example, Berg and Steiner, 2003; Milner and Bateman, 2011).

The approach of solution-focused brief therapy distinguishes itself from other more traditional forms of interventions because the change that is sought is located in an imagined future. The task of solving problems is approached by seeking to move towards what is wanted instead of trying to move away from an unwanted problem.

In offering this support, the practitioner makes the assumption that the child or young person is the expert on their own life. In asking useful questions, the process enables the person to begin moving towards the future they want and to learn from their own existing skills, strategies and ideas of what could be done differently. Although the principle is simple, the delivery of the approach is often felt to be far from easy: "Solution-focused interviewing is not an easy process; it is one in which therapists have to search as hard for the questions as their clients have to search for their answers." (Ratner et al, 2012, p109)

This task of working with children and young people using a solution-focused approach can require innovative means to channel communication and pose the questions that are at the core of solution-focused brief therapy. It is the challenges experienced by NSPCC practitioners in using solution-focused practice with children and young

people, and the creative solutions that they have devised that has led to the development of this toolkit.

## NSPCC's Face to Face service

The NSPCC's Face to Face service has been delivered in 18 locations in the UK. The service is offered to children and young people in care and those on the edge of care who wish to receive support and can identify something that they wish to change in their life. Trained NSPCC practitioners work with the children and young people using a solution-focused approach, to identify how the child can make positive changes in their life to achieve their wishes. Practitioners delivering the Face to Face service received introductory training in using solution-focused practice.

The Face to Face service is being evaluated and links to published evaluation reports can be found in the resources section at the end of this toolkit.

## A toolkit for working with children and young people

This toolkit was first developed by NSPCC practitioners to support themselves and their colleagues in conducting solution-focused work with children and young people aged five to 19.

The NSPCC has been using solution-focused practice with children and young people in our Face to Face service since September 2011. Through this work our practitioners have developed a wealth of knowledge in communicating different aspects of the solution-focused approach to children of varying ages, interests and needs. We have decided to develop and publish this toolkit so that others using solution-focused practice with children can benefit from the collective experience and creativity of our practitioners and the children they have worked with. The toolkit presents ideas for worksheets and activities that NSPCC practitioners have found to be helpful in working with children and young people. We do not intend this toolkit to be prescriptive or

# Introduction (continued)

limiting in any way. Each child will have different needs and interests; therefore, you will want to tailor your practice and any ideas in this toolkit to make them relevant and useful to the individual. Inevitably, the best ideas will come directly from the young person – many of the case examples provided show how young people have brought their own ideas into this work. However, we do hope that the ideas set out in this toolkit will provide inspiration for activities that you may wish to use, adapt or devise for the children and young people that you work with.

NSPCC practitioners have often found it helpful to come to sessions of the Face to Face service prepared with worksheets and activities to help young people to get started on their solution-focused journey (some examples of these are shared in this toolkit). However, while worksheets can be helpful, you may find that they are unnecessary.

## Who this toolkit is for

This toolkit has been developed to help people who have already received training in using a solution-focused approach with children and young people. It provides practical materials and resources that can be used specifically with children and young people.

You will find brief introductions at the start of each section of the toolkit to refresh your memory on different aspects of the solution-focused approach. However, for a fuller discussion we suggest that you consult other texts, such as Berg and Steiner, 2003; Milner and Bateman, 2011; Ratner et al, 2012; and Shennan, 2014 (full publication details are provided in the resources section).

## Things to consider

- Every child and young person is different and will have different needs and interests.
- You may/will want to modify your approach depending on the age, ethnicity and developmental stage of the child, as well as taking into account their individual learning style, emotional literacy and any learning difficulties or disabilities. Is the child particularly creative or active, or do they prefer reading and writing? Berg and Steiner (2003, p13–14) emphasise the importance of “learning children’s ways”.
- The section in this toolkit called ‘problem-free talk’ includes activities that can be used to help the solution-focused practitioner get to know the child and what is important to them.
- Do not let the activities you choose be restricted by the child’s age. Some teenagers will enjoy drawing exercises or using a sand tray, while some younger children will be very confident about expressing their opinions verbally.
- The role of the child’s existing support network is important in facilitating and reinforcing the work taking place within your sessions with them. In this toolkit, we refer to the child’s support network as the ‘solution team’.
- Come to sessions prepared with a back-up option, as your planned approach may not always work.
- Tailor your approaches as you go, to keep them relevant to the individual and the work itself as it progresses.
- Bring the child’s earlier work to subsequent sessions so that you can refer back to it and chart progress.

# 1

## **Explaining the solution-focused approach to children**

# Explaining the solution-focused approach to children

## What is the solution-focused approach?

**“It seems quite clear that one cannot solve the problem with the same kind of thinking that has created the problem”.**

(Berg and de Shazer, 1993, p9).

The solution-focused approach poses questions to children to help them to: identify what they want from the work, understand what is within their capacity, explore what they are doing to move towards this.

The process will identify instances when the desired outcome is already happening and how the child can do more of what is working. Their previous experiences of help may have been more ‘problem-focused’, leading them to expect a particular approach. Therefore, it can be useful to explain the solution-focused approach and how it can be experienced as ‘different’. This will help the child to gain some understanding of the process so as not to be left sitting ‘on guard’ when different questions are being used.

## Things to consider

It is probably best to avoid a lengthy introduction, which may risk the child losing interest. The best way to explain the approach may be to show it to the child in action, by actually starting the work. Shennan suggests asking the child or young person whether they would like an explanation of the work, or whether they would just like to get started (2014, p144–5).

The aim of this toolkit is to provide a variety of exercises, games and activities that can help keep the child interested and engaged in the work at each step of the way.

## Tools to use with children and young people to explain the solution focused approach

- ‘My journey’ overview: explanation
- ‘My journey’ overview: tool
- Ladders and tool bags: explanation
- Ladders and tool bags: tool
- Jamie’s story cartoon: tool

## Tool: 'My journey' overview

### The solution focused journey:

- You start by identifying your hopes for the work
- You think about what achieving your hopes would look like
- You think about what you are already doing to move towards your hopes
- You think about what it would look like if you moved just one or two steps closer toward reaching your hopes
- As you go, you learn more about your strengths and what you are capable of.

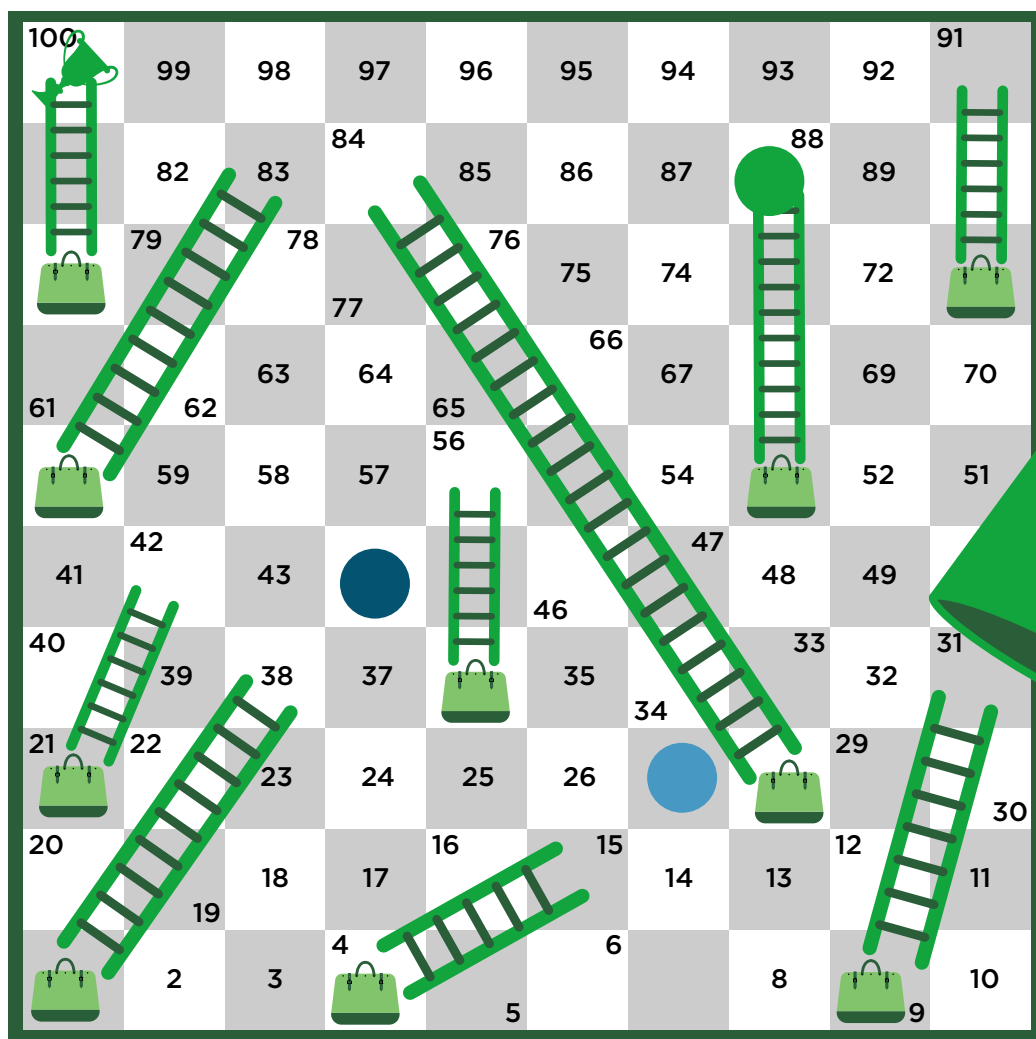




## Tool: Ladders and tool bags

### Instruction:

- This tool could be used at several stages of the solution-focused process (for example, problem-free talk or moving toward the preferred future).
- If you use this tool as part of problem-free talk, the aim is to identify strengths rather than defining the child's hopes.
- The tool bags represent the skills and strengths the child knows about himself/herself.
- Explain to the child that everyone has strengths, and that you will help them to think about theirs.
- The child rolls dice and if they land on a tool bag, they describe one or more of their strengths (and can draw/write it on the bag). Then they can move up the ladder!



## Tool: Jamie's story

**Here is Jamie.**

**He is being bullied  
and wants some  
help to feel better.**

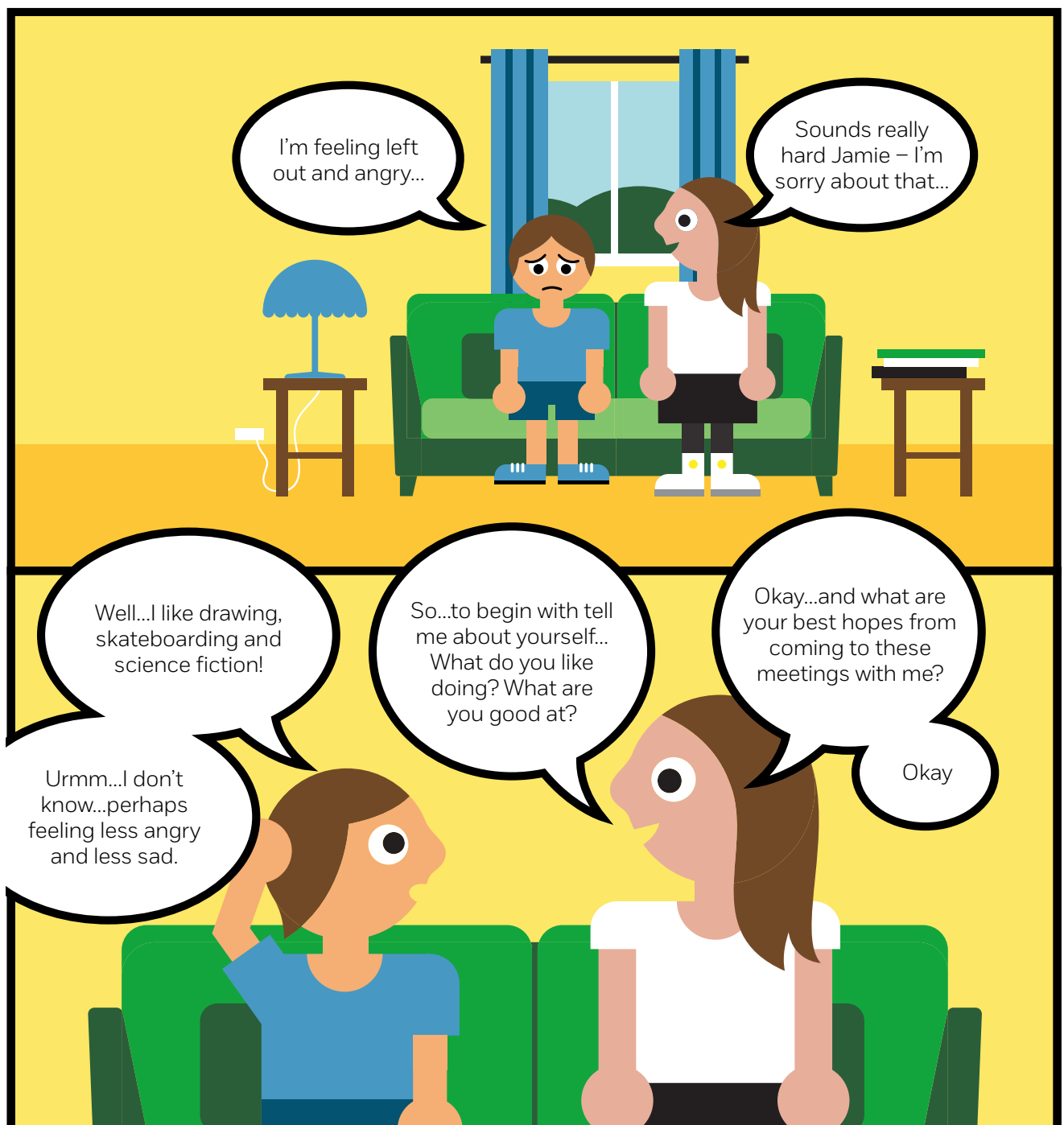
**He decides to give  
the Face to Face  
service a try...**



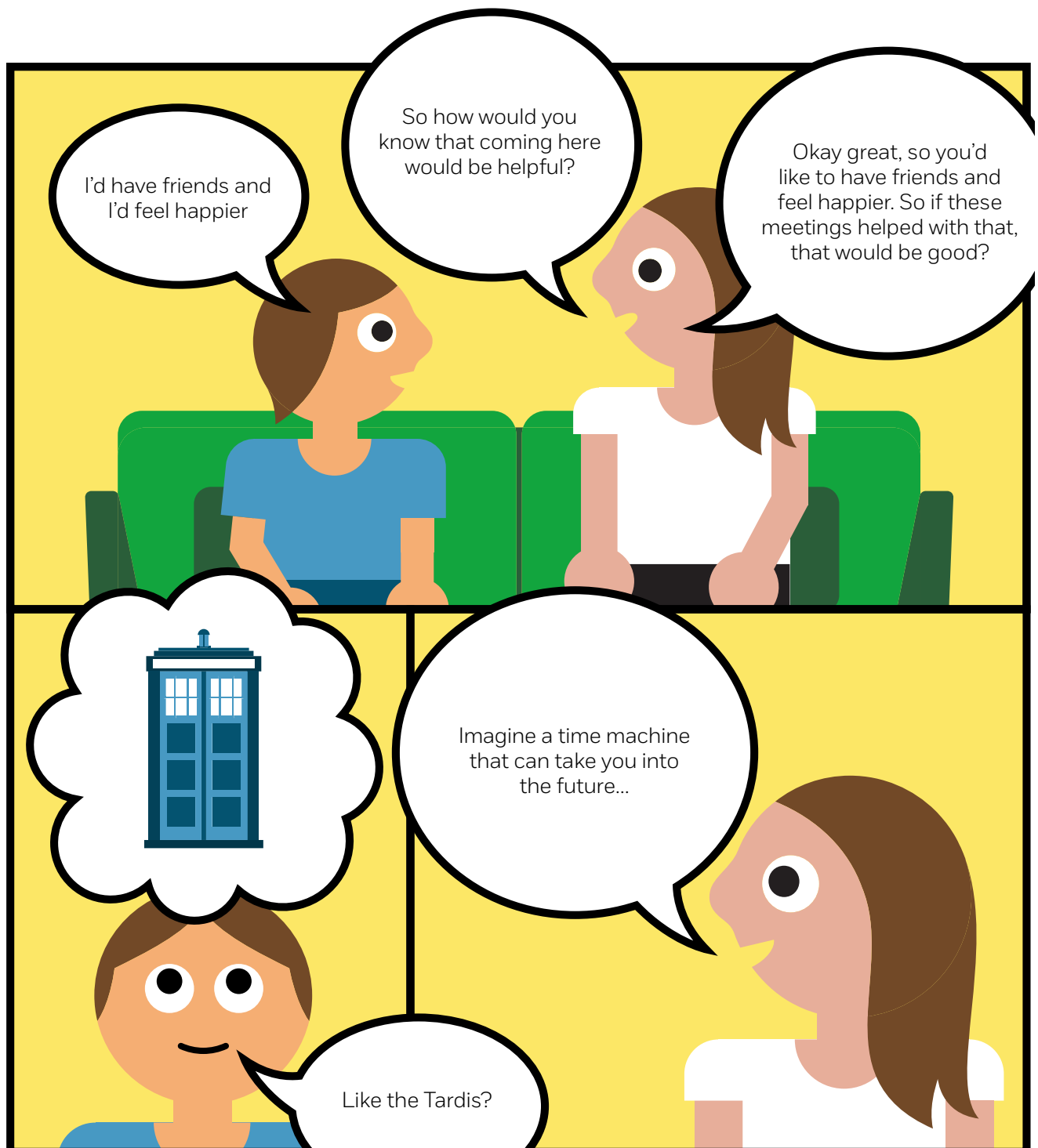
Welcome Jamie  
Take a seat,  
Let's talk



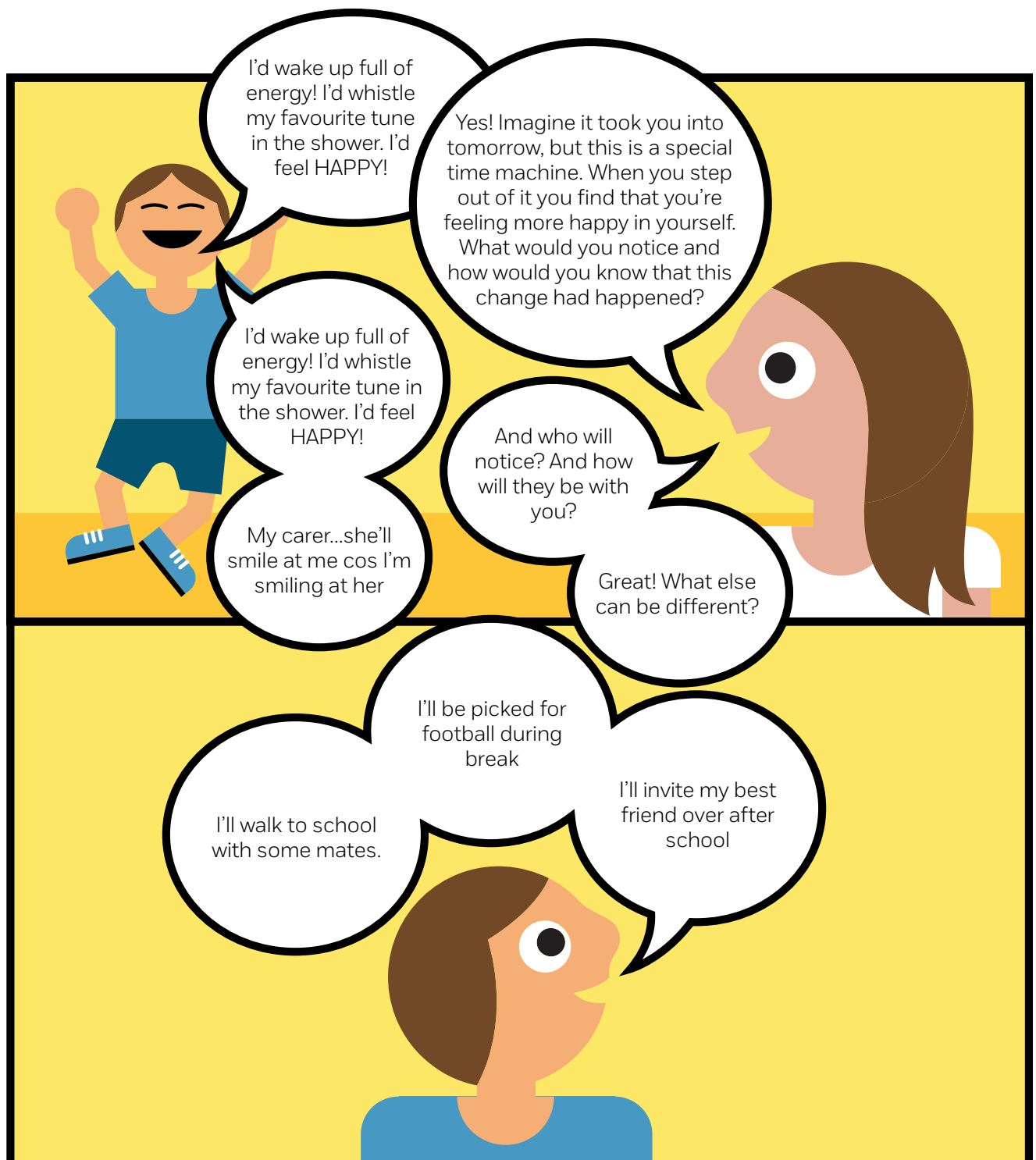
## Tool: Jamie's story (continued)



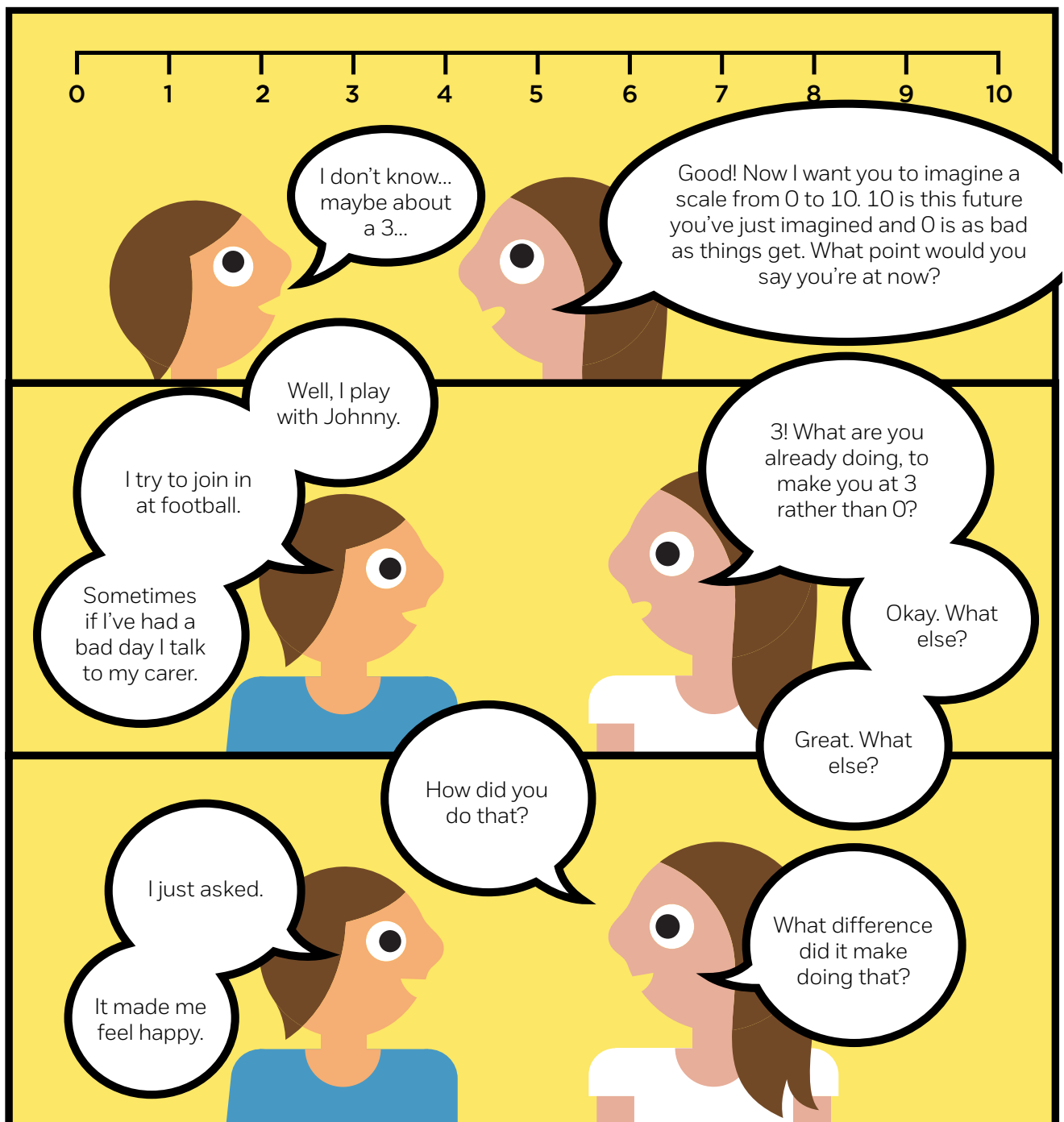
## Tool: Jamie's story (continued)



## Tool: Jamie's story (continued)



## Tool: Jamie's story (continued)



## Tool: Jamie's story (continued)



## 2

# Problem-free talk



# Problem-free talk

## Introduction

When you first meet the child or young person, it will be important to learn some things from them; their interests, skills and strengths. This information will help you to plan future sessions and select suitable tools and activities that fit the child's interests. Please note that where we refer to 'problem-free talk' this is not just limited to verbal discussion, it could be other forms of interaction like drawing, play-acting or other activities.

Engaging in problem-free talk provides a positive start to the solution-focused process. Inviting the child to describe their likes and strengths will communicate to them that there is more to them than just the problem. This way you and the child will be reminded of the resourceful person who has abilities and skills. At this point you have the opportunity to re-frame the child's thinking around their strengths, so that they can start to see themselves in a different, more positive way. Building these positive references supports the child to begin considering other possibilities and to become hopeful that change is possible. As a practitioner you can also use problem-free talk to show that you are choosing to work with a resourceful and capable child who has lots of positive qualities, rather than perceiving the child as difficult and troublesome.

With younger children it may take some time to help them identify their hopes for this work. Playing a game or carrying out a 'getting to know you' activity may help you to learn what is important to them. These activities may also help you to find out about their 'solution team' – this is the people in their life who can offer them support and encouragement.

You could offer the child or young person a variety of games or exercises for them to choose from. Examples of these might be the 'ladders and tool bags' game or some of the exercises set out in this section of the toolkit.

## Things to consider

Please bear in mind that it is the aim of problem free talk to help the child to discover positive things about themselves. However, if a child needs to unburden themselves, they may need some to spend some time talking about problems at the outset of a session, to get this off their chest. Your role as a practitioner will be to listen to them and acknowledge what they tell you, while listening out for ways that you can draw the conversation towards solutions. For example, you may say, "That sounds difficult, how did you cope with that situation?"

### Other things to consider at the outset of the work include:

- What does the child or young person like?
- Are they particularly active, creative or imaginative?
- Do they enjoy role playing or drawing or listening to and telling stories?
- If the child is shy, would it be helpful to have some activities that do not require a lot of direct eye contact?
- If a child is struggling to identify their strengths, it may be useful to draw on third party reports, by saying, "What would a friend say about you?"

### Tools to use with children and young people for problem-free talk:

- My likes and strengths: explanation
- My likes and strengths: tool
- Strengths cards: explanation
- Strengths cards: tool
- My strengths shield: explanation
- My strengths shield: tool
- Ladders and tool bags: explanation
- Ladders and tool bags: tool

### Activities to use with children and young people for problem-free talk:

- Strengths exercises: explanation
- Outdoor activities: explanation

## Some examples of problem-free talk from NSPCC's Face to Face service

She was a nine-year-old girl, living with extended family members because she'd experienced neglect from her mum and dad due to their substance misuse. She was having issues with angry behaviour, smashing things and throwing things, and both school and her carers were struggling with her behaviour. She also wanted to improve her behaviour.

During the problem-free talk, I found out that she really liked the film Frozen. So for the next session I did some little cut outs using the characters from the film and used the idea of them to help develop the sessions. In thinking about strengths she could use, if she was stuck I would say "I wonder which character could help?" So she'd pick one up from the group and hold the character to her mouth and she'd whisper to the figure. Then she'd tell me what the character had said to her. So she was finding solutions with the figures. That was really helpful.

One girl who was referred to the Face to Face service was described in the referral as lying and manipulative. She also had a negative view of herself. So the beginning of the work was about re-framing why she was there and why she wanted to do the work. I asked her what was good about her, so that I could get to know the positive, resourceful person I was going to be working with. We spent the first part of the work reframing a positive identity for her around her interests and what she was good at.

We used some 'getting to know you' cards, which is like making up a quiz about each other. So, you'd pick a card and ask a question. Some of the questions are quite fun, like, "What's your favourite pizza topping?", and some of them are a bit more serious, like, "In the future, I would like to..." and then there are more difficult questions. As a practitioner, you go through the cards beforehand and take out the ones that don't suit that particular piece of work, and it's a nice way of building a picture of them as a person..

I was working with a teenage boy who was very quiet and shy. He struggled to open up and talk during his first session. I spotted that he had the name of a band on his bag and when I asked him about it, he told me that he was into rap music. So I asked him to recommend a song I should listen to. I went away and listened to it on YouTube and wrote out the song lyrics. Then I took the lyrics to our next session and we talked about them. I asked him why those lyrics were meaningful to him and it was a way into talking about his family. Through that conversation he was able to identify his best hopes.

Lola aged 15, was living in a children's home at the time we started work together. She had previously experienced some instability in care following the breakdown of a foster care placement. She had learning difficulties and was attending a school for children with special needs.

Lola's aim was to move into a foster care placement and have a calm, relaxed home life with her foster family. She loved shopping. So one of our sessions involved us walking around the shops and doing the solution-focused work verbally while we walked. There was a strong element of problem-free talk. While we were walking around the shops, I was able to say how well behaved she was, how calm, how well she spoke to the shop assistant, those kind of things. So we pointed out lots of examples of her strengths, which we could then build into the work.

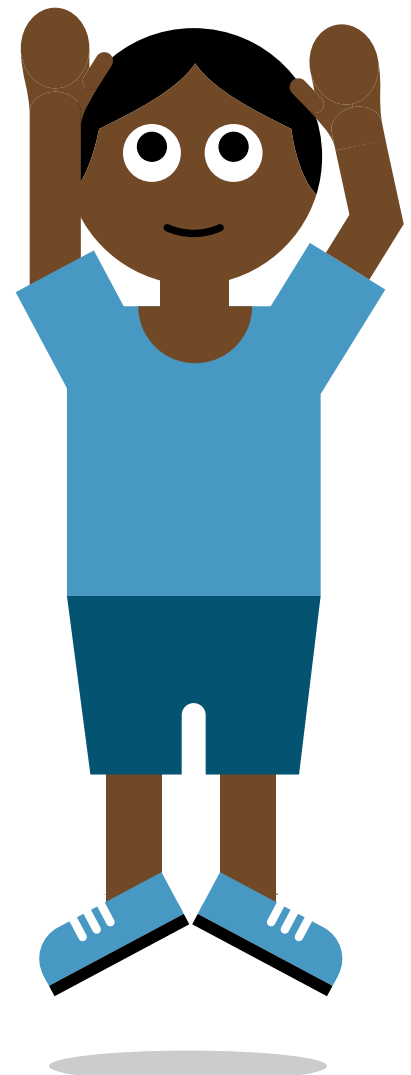
## Tool: My likes and strengths

Ask the child to draw on and around the image to make it look like them.

**Then ask the child:**

- What do you like?
- What are you good at?
- What does it take to be good at that?
- What are your strengths?
- What are you most proud of?

Encourage the child to add drawings and descriptions to their picture. Alternatively the child or young person could make a collage using magazine cuttings or other images.



## Tool: Strength cards

Strengths cards can be a helpful way to engage children and young people to explore their own strengths. Please see the resources section for website links to sets of strengths cards that can be purchased.

### You might ask the child to select from the strengths cards:

- Which of these words are most like you?
- Pick a card that describes you
- Which card would your friend choose for you?

If a child is struggling to identify strengths using the above questions, remind the child of the activity they like and connect the strength to that activity.

You could also create your own set of personalised strengths cards with the young person, using images and words that are relevant to them.

You could discuss relevant strengths and appropriate accompanying images together and create the child's own set of cards. Each time the child identifies a strength, ask them to give examples of how they have used it. Strengths could be represented by superheroes or any image or character that is meaningful to the child. You might ask the child "Which superhero are you most like?"

You could keep adding to the child's pack of strengths cards as you continue the work with them and they identify more strengths that they are using.

Strengths descriptors might include the following but this is not a definitive list: curious, funny, kind, thoughtful, caring, fun, strong, brave, protective, friendly, honest, helpful, independent, sociable, fair, patient, confident, creative, generous, tolerant.

Some examples of strengths cards, which you can customise, are included in the tool in the appendix.



## Tool: My strengths shield

Support the child/young person to reflect on some of the actions/changes that they have implemented that they feel have been positive for them. Encourage them to link this with attributes and qualities they see in themselves:

- What did it take to do that?
- What was it that helped you to do that?

If this is difficult it can be useful to ask them to imagine a friend having accomplished what they have done and to try to describe what that says about the person, what skills do they have, what strengths etc.

Work together to create a 'Personal shield or crest' that will represent the positive attributes and strategies they have identified. Provide a range of craft materials to allow for decoration and visualising resources within the person and skills/strategies that they have used to help themselves



## Activity: Drawing and writing exercises

### Drawing

Ask the child or young person to draw:

- **Himself/ herself doing something skilful:** Imagine you are looking in through a window at yourself doing something skilful. Draw what you can see!
- **Special camera:** Imagine there is a special camera that can take photos of all of the things you can do. Draw the pictures this camera would be able to take.

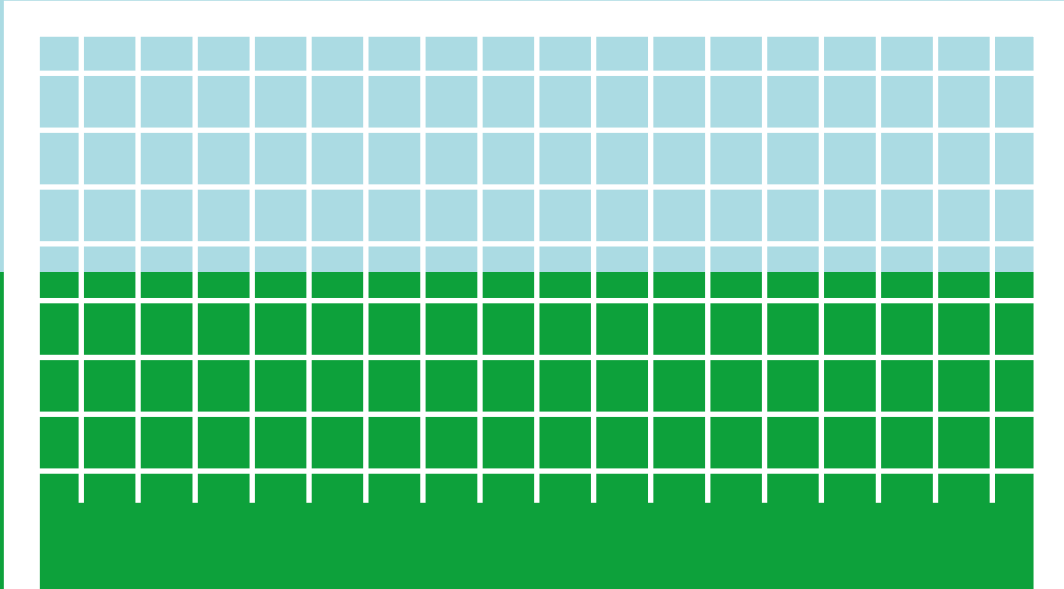
### Writing games/ exercises

Ask the child to think of a strength they have and then play hangman with the child to guess the strength!

Suggest that the young person writes a mind map or spider diagram of things they like to do and things they like about themselves.



## Activity: Outdoor activities



This might be a good approach for children and young people who are very active, enjoy sports or find it easier to talk while they are moving or otherwise occupied.

### Using sports and games to identify strengths

You will need access to a football and football goal or equivalent equipment for another sport, like basketball or tennis.

The child scores a goal/ hits a ball over the net:

- For each point they score, ask the child to name one of their strengths or another positive attribute
- Or (for follow-on sessions), after each point ask the child to explain what has been better since last week

There could be equivalents for dance or athletics, or whatever the child is interested in.

### Other examples

Other activities that could be used to engage children in conversation about their strengths/ positive things about them might include:

- Hopscotch
- Acting out scenarios in a sand tray
- Using photographs or magazine images
- Walking outside





# 3

## **Establishing what is wanted: the destination of the work**

# Establishing what is wanted: the destination of the work

## Introduction

The process of establishing what the child or young person wants from your work with them is also known as finding out their 'best hopes' or establishing a contract with them (Shennan, 2014). This is an essential part of the process as the child or young person's best hopes will become the focus for your subsequent work with them.

There may be times when other agencies, carers or family members will make suggestions in relation to the focus of the work. Although this can be considered, the contracting must be with the child or young person. Therefore, it is the child's best hope that should be the focus throughout.

When asking children about their best hopes, NSPCC practitioners have experienced a variety of answers, ranging from a shrug of the shoulders to "I dunno" to "Feel better about myself" to "Stop being so angry" to "Wanting to move back to mum", to name but a few. The challenge is to formulate a best hope that is achievable for the child, so that the work can progress toward this.

Harry Korman (2004), cited in Ratner et al (2012, p65), has given some clear guidance on criteria that the child or young person's 'best hopes' need to meet as part of the solution-focused process.

### These are:

1. Something that the client wishes to achieve, which
2. Fits with the practitioner's legitimate remit, and which
3. The practitioner and client working well together could hope to achieve

Some children may readily be able to identify what they want from the work, but others may need some help to identify what is important to them, and what they would like to focus on during their time with you (the solution-focused practitioner). To keep the work in a solution-focused mindset, it is important that the child's best hopes are phrased in positive terms, for example "I'd like to have more friends" rather than "I want to feel less lonely".

## Things to consider

A variety of questions can be used, together with tools and resources, to ask the child or young person what they would like to achieve through your work together. These might include:

- What are your best hopes for our work together?
- Is there anything that you would like to change in your life?
- And if you changed that, what would be different about you?
- What would be different if the 'problem' was not here?
- How would you know that our time together has helped you?

For more examples of contracting questions, please refer to Milner and Bateman (2011) and Shennan (2014).

You may need to explain to the child what a possible hoped-for outcome for your work together could be (see the tool: 'Like scoring a goal!'). It is important that the child or young person identifies something that they can achieve, rather than something that is outside of their control. Therefore, it may take some discussion and negotiation to identify a hoped-for outcome that is meaningful to the child and also suitable for a solution-focused piece of work.

# Establishing what is wanted: the destination of the work (continued)

If a child or young person identifies as their best hopes something that is not within the practitioner's remit, it is important to acknowledge their wish, but also to be honest that this is not something the solution-focused work can achieve. The best hopes activity continues until an achievable best hope has been agreed. Please see a fuller discussion of this scenario in Ratner et al (2012, p72–3).

Following the identification of the child's hopes, the next stage of work will be to help them to describe the achievement of their hopes in detail, and what achieving their hopes will mean to them and others around them (for more on this, please see the next section).

## Tools to use with children and young people to establish what is wanted:

- Identifying the child's best hopes: explanation
- My best hopes: tool
- Crystal ball: explanation
- Crystal ball: tool
- Which one is me?: explanation
- Which one is me?: tool
- Traffic lights: explanation
- Traffic lights: tool
- My hopes (thought bubble): explanation
- My hopes (thought bubble): tool
- Changing the channel: explanation
- Changing the channel: tool

## Activities to use with children and young people to establish what is wanted

- Talking through puppets: explanation
- Using spider diagrams

## Some case examples from NSPCC's Face to Face service

Paul, aged 13, was in a temporary foster placement when he was referred to me by his social worker. He had been living with his extended family members and for the past year they had all been coping with a family bereavement. Paul was acting out more than his brothers and had become picked out in the family as struggling with his behaviour. He was seemingly being blamed for the problems that the family was having at the time.

When I met with him, one of the difficulties I had was that he was a very reserved, quiet young person, to the extent that after the first session, I thought, "He's not going to want to come back, he hated that". I felt like I was asking him a lot of questions and there would be long silences and pauses and not an awful lot coming back.

So when we were looking to identify his best hopes, I thought maybe we needed something that we could focus on during the sessions, as well as talking. So I brought along a canvas and some paint and thought maybe he could paint his best hopes as well as talk about it, and that worked quite well.

What Paul painted about a lot was a change in the family set up and that seemed to be a very hopeful thing for the whole family. So Paul had some hopes for the future, though they weren't clearly about what he wanted from our work together. But I kind of persisted with asking questions and we got to a point by about the third session after the miracle question, where Paul talked about having a better relationship with one of his relatives in particular. So that became his best hopes for the work.

What seemed to happen was that during the work he realised that he would probably never be able to live with this family member again, but that they could still have a better relationship, especially if he was able to do well in his foster placement and attend school and things, just through having regular contact.

## Some case examples from NSPCC's Face to Face service

I've often found spider diagrams to be a really useful way of creating a visual list of feelings, thoughts and actions and I've used them with quite a few young people who have accessed the NSPCC's Face to Face service.

I would start by writing down the young person's best hopes in the middle of the page – this might be "To get on better with my mum" or "To be more confident". I always use the young person's own words when I'm writing things down, which is really helpful because I can refer back to what they said with accuracy and it makes it more meaningful for them.

We'll then explore what "Being more confident" would look like, so I might ask the young person to detail what their day would be like if they woke up feeling more confident. They might respond by saying "I'd speak up in class" or "I'd speak to a shop assistant", so we'd extend the spider diagram by writing all of this down. We'd then capture how others would respond to this change, things like "My friends would laugh and joke with me more", or "People would ask me questions".

Because we're putting down the young person's thoughts, actions and feelings, and then adding to this, we're recording all their responses, which allows the young person to see what they're saying (and thinking). It makes it much more real for them and it gives me more information so that I can explore things further and ask more questions.

Spider diagrams can be used within any stage of the Face to Face process, which is a real strength. Some young people have made quite rapid progress in the early sessions – I've had young people returning to education, establishing better relationships with their families, friends and carers, having less arguments, or feeling "...like my old self" again. So we've often returned to their early spider diagrams in later sessions so that we can capture what they've been doing differently and identify all the new skills they've been using. Then if they want to, when the work has come to an end, they can keep their spider diagrams as a reminder of their strengths and the positive steps they've taken.

## Tool: Identifying the child's best hopes

### Ask the young person:

- What would you be pleased to achieve?
- How would this change things for you in a good way?
- What difference would it make?



## Tool: Crystal Ball

The crystal ball image can be used to help the child to identify and define their best hopes.

Ask the child: "How would you know that our time together has helped you? What would you like to see in the crystal ball?"

Crystal balls are neutral, so encourage the child to think about what they want in the future. Please note that a blank crystal ball work sheet can be found in the tools section at the back of this toolkit.



## Tool: Which one do I want to be me?

Ask the child to identify one of the people to represent them when the work is ended, which can show that the work was useful. Once the child has picked one, ask what is going on for that person which is good for them; once you have heard more detail around this, re-word what has been said and ask the child if that is what they would like to work towards in their sessions.

Please see the blank tool in the tools section at the back of this document.





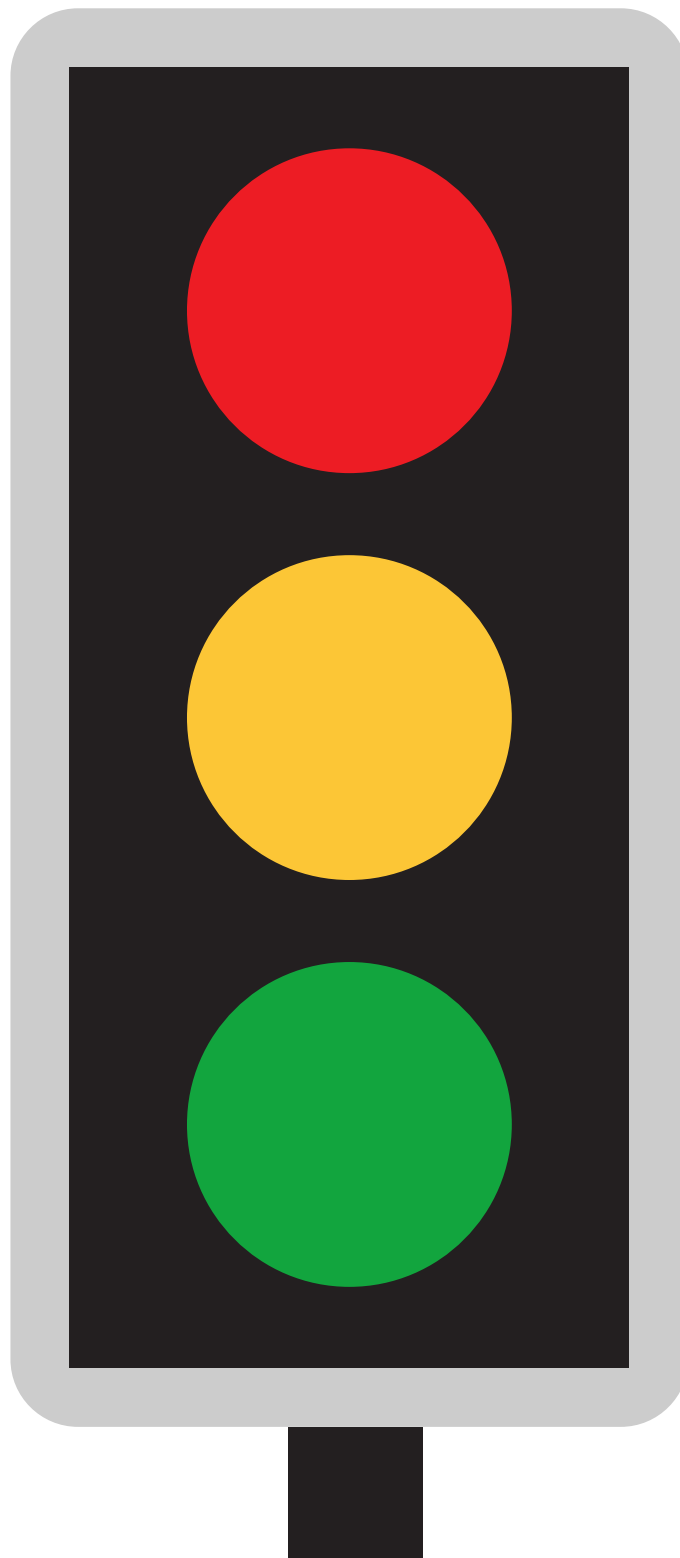
## Tool: Traffic lights

### Instructions:

Suggest that the child draws on/ around the traffic lights

### Explain to the child:

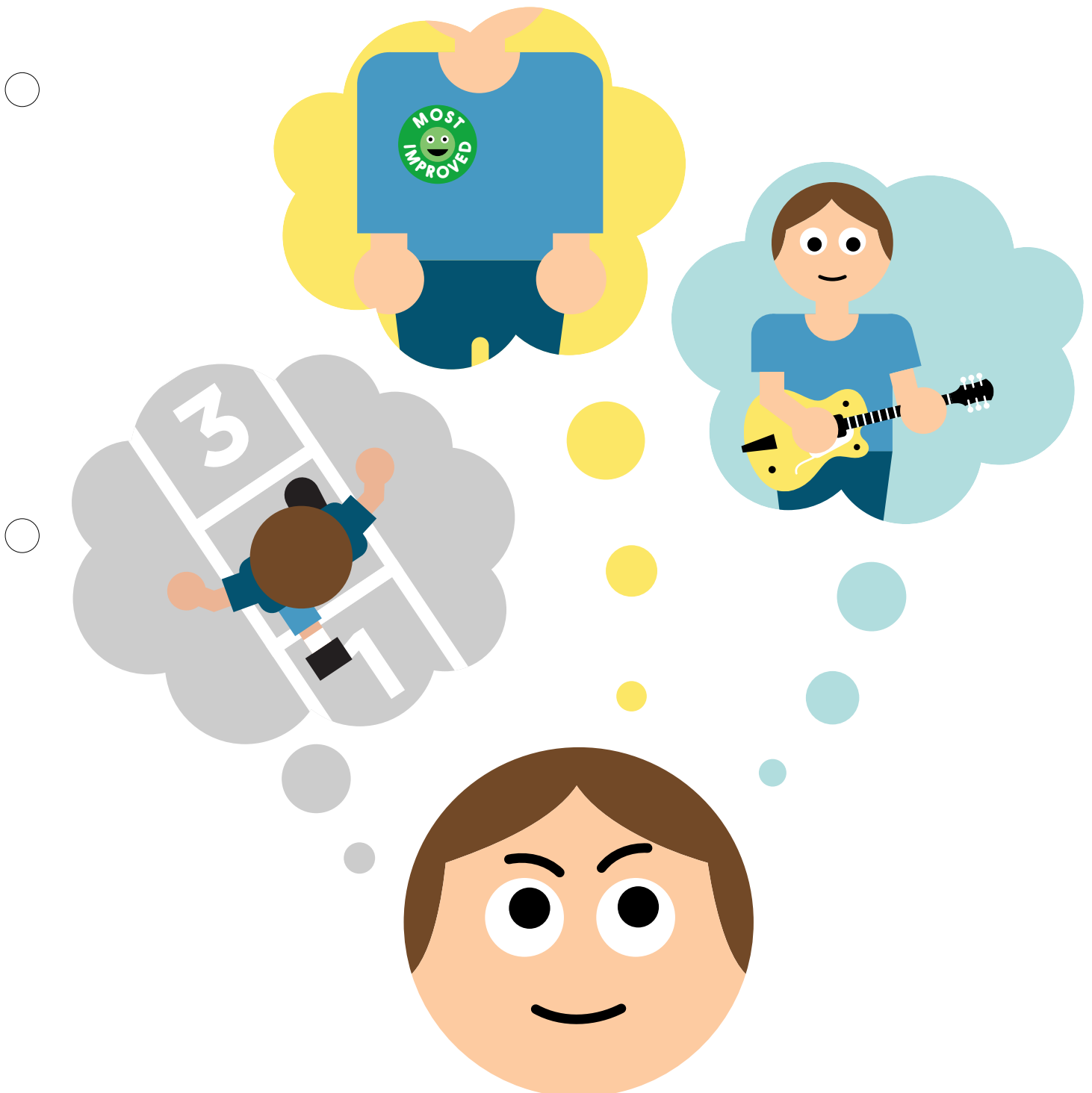
"If RED is the worst that things can be, which you want to STOP from happening, and AMBER is where you are now - ABOUT TO MOVE! – and GREEN is where you want to GO to,, what would tell you that the light is on GREEN?"



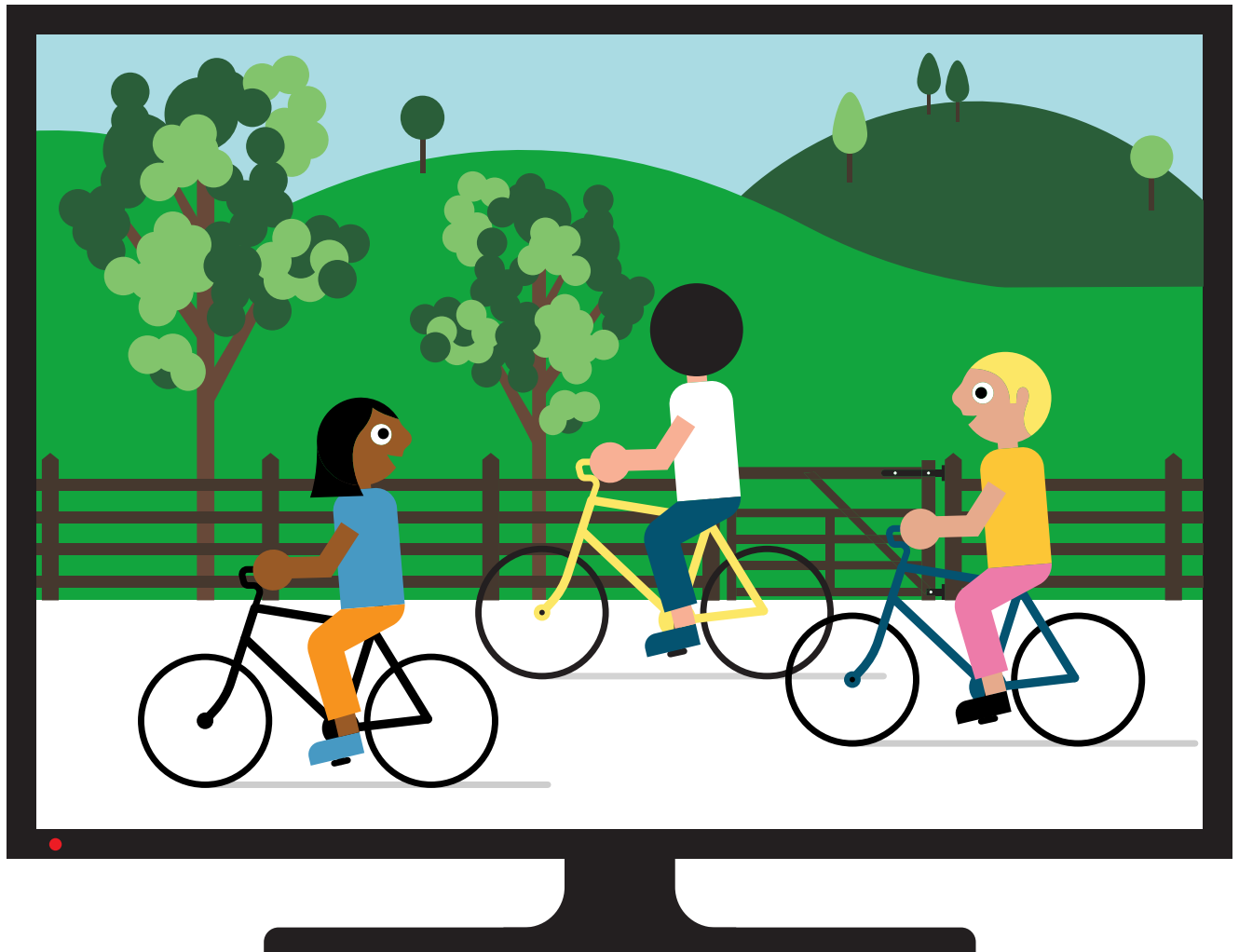
## Tool: My hopes

Ask the child to draw himself/ herself and then put their hopes in the thought bubbles.

You can find a blank work sheet in the section at the end of this toolkit.



## Tool: Changing the channel

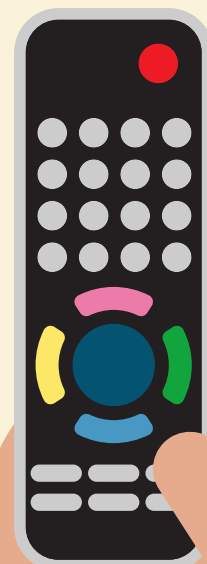


Ask the child to draw on/ around the picture of the television.

**If our work could change a channel in your life, so that things were better for you...**

- What would be different about you?
- What might other people see happening in your new programme?
- If there was one small thing that would be different about you, what would that be?

You can find the blank worksheet in the tools section at the back of this toolkit.



## Activity: Talking through puppets

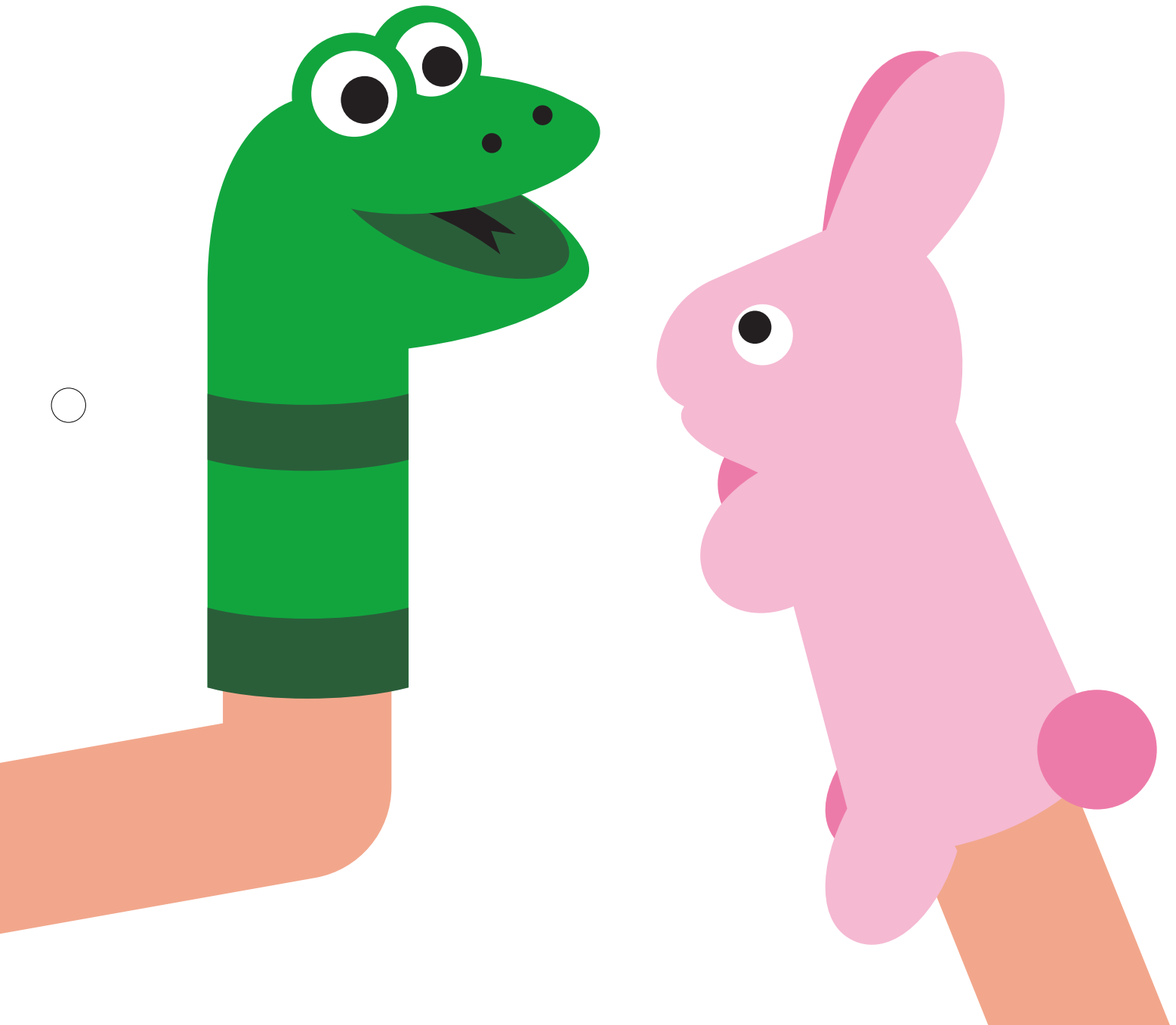
It can be useful to enable a child to speak in the third person if they are feeling shy or are struggling with answering questions directly.

Using puppets can be useful in any part of the process, and not only when helping a child to think about what they want from the work at this contracting stage. In their book 'Children's Solution Work', Berg and Steiner provide some further explanation and case examples describing how hand puppets can be used to help children talk about themselves during solution-focused work (2003, p78 – 81).

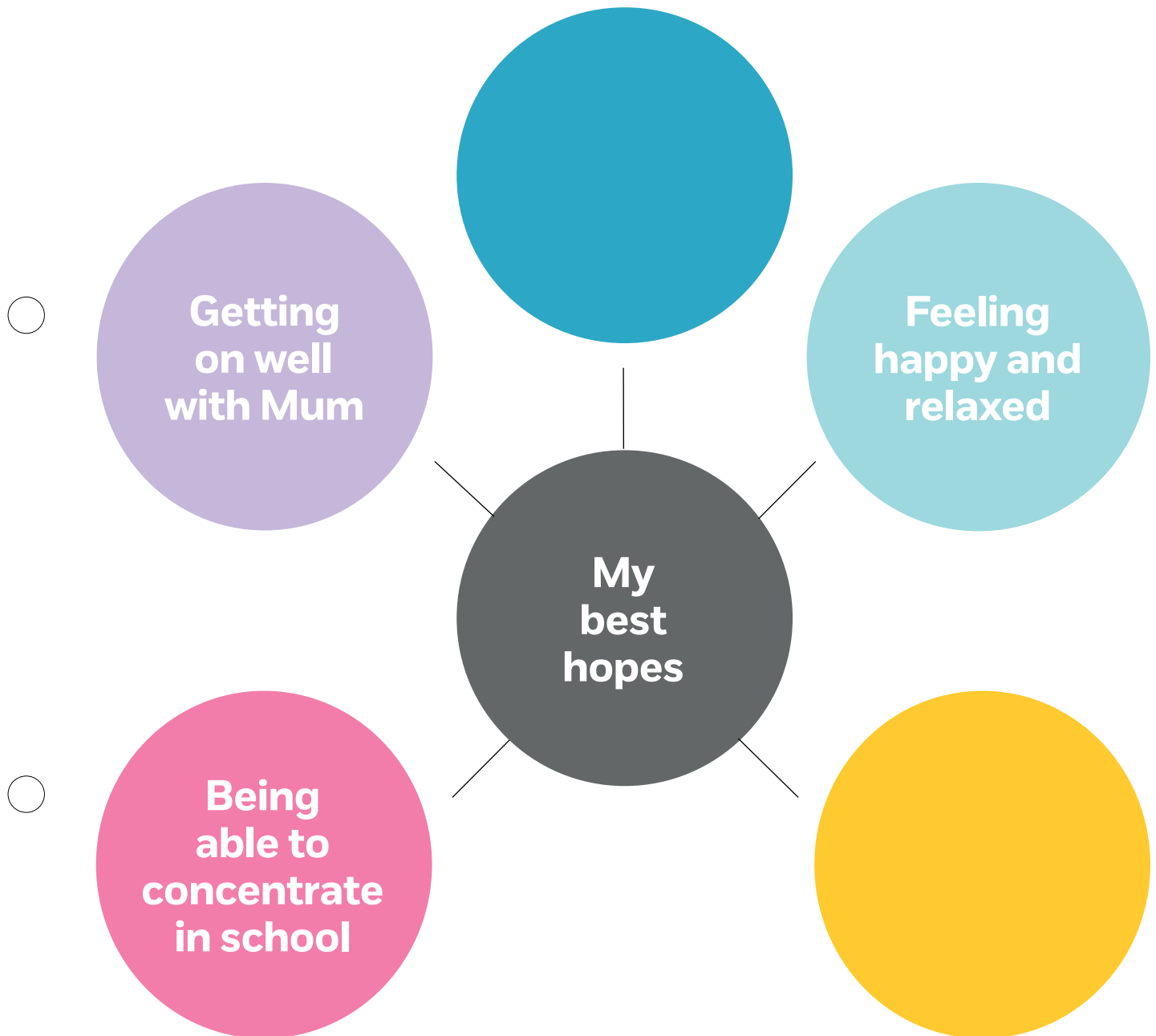
### Suggested approach:

Provide hand puppets and ask the child to choose a puppet. Ask the puppet questions about the child (potentially using a hand puppet to ask the questions). The child replies through the hand puppet.

Alternative options might include action figures, Lego people, stuffed toys etc.



## Activity: Using spider diagrams



Spider diagrams can be helpful to slow down the discussion about the young person's best hopes and could be revisited later in the process to explore the child's preferred future and get more detail from the young person about why this is meaningful for them

If used for the best hopes, the child or young person may identify a number of best hopes. Mapping them out in this way can help the child visualise their best hopes and decide which one they want to prioritise.

If the young person or practitioner draws a spider diagram or mind map while the young person is talking, this can then provide a record to refer back to later in the conversation or at later stages in the work.

If a mind map is used in a discussion about the young person's preferred future, it can help the young person to imagine what the future could look like. You can encourage the young person to add lots of detail, so that the whole page is filled.

# 4

**Describing what is  
wanted in detail:  
the preferred future**

# Describing what is wanted in detail: the preferred future

## Introduction

This part of the work enables the child or young person to start describing a future in which they have moved towards achieving their best hopes. This is often referred to as the child's 'preferred future'. One of the means of helping people to describe their preferred future is through the use of the 'miracle question'. The origins of the miracle question, first developed by Insoo Kim Berg, are discussed by Guy Shennan in his book *Solution-Focused Practice* (2014, p49–52). A few variations on the miracle question are framed on the worksheets included in this section of the toolkit (for example, 'waving a magic wand' and 'the miracle day'). Blank versions of these worksheets are included in the appendix.

Once the child has identified their best hopes for the work, you can move onto this part of the process – that is, helping the child to describe their preferred future. However, if you move onto this part of the work before a clear contract (the child's best hopes) has been identified and agreed, this could become confusing for you and the child, and could get in the way of a focused piece of work.

This step of the process is important because it helps the child or young person to envisage the future, with their best hopes achieved, and to bring this to life as a possibility. The process asks the child to describe 'how they would know/what they see/what do they do/who notices?' when their best hopes are happening and then to build detail around their description. In the details they describe, the child will find the building blocks of their solutions, which are already taking place and which they may be able to do more of. It is important to gain detail and build ideas of what else is possible.

This activity is also valuable because it will give the young person clues about the future they are seeking to move towards, how they might get there and how this may affect them and other people around them in a positive way.

## Describing what is wanted in detail: the preferred future (continued)

The purpose of children describing their preferred future is to release their imagination of what is possible and what can be. Some children and young people will be able to describe their preferred future if they are simply invited to. You could initiate the conversation in this way:

**“Suppose, when you wake up tomorrow, you find that [insert whatever their best hopes are here] is happening – what’s the first thing you’d notice about yourself?”**

It works well to start with the first thing the child would notice as you can then encourage them to describe their whole day from start to finish, with lots of detail; what they would be doing, how they would feel, what they would do; what they would notice; what other people would notice. Please see the tools in this section, which pose a variety of questions you may wish to ask the child or young person.

The worksheets and activities set out below are intended to support this process for children who might respond better to drawing or written exercises, or who could benefit from a slower pace as they mull over the question of how they will experience and recognise their preferred future.

Encourage the child or young person to add as much detail as possible to their description of their preferred future. Be mindful of not moving on too quickly from this stage of the process.

### Things to consider

- Make sure that the way you discuss this with the child or young person is appropriate to their age, interests and cultural background
- Note that scenarios involving miracles or magic may not be appropriate for all children
- Might the child wish to share their best hopes and their preferred future with a member of their ‘solution team’? (Please see chapter seven for a fuller discussion of the role of the solution team.)

### Tools to use with children and young people to describe their preferred future

- Waving a magic wand: explanation
- Waving a magic wand: tool
- My miracle day: explanation
- My miracle day: tool
- The miracle day: explanation
- The miracle day: tool
- Cartoon strip: tool

### Activities to use with children and young people to explore their preferred future

- Drawing a time machine: explanation
- Play-acting the child’s preferred future or using props: explanation
- Using the sand tray: explanation
- Writing a letter from the future: explanation
- Using spider diagrams: explanation (see previous section)



## Case examples from NSPCC's Face to Face service

This was a 16-year-old male who was at risk of entering care when his relationship with his family broke down. He now lives with a family member and is in education.

He was able to identify his best hope, which focused around self-esteem/confidence in socialising; however, once we got into the main part of the solution-focused work where we were trying to explore his preferred future, he withdrew and became upset. We explored his upset and it became apparent that his self-esteem was inhibiting the work method we were using. What I mean by that is that if he couldn't think of an answer to a question straight away, he would start beating himself up in his head; the more questions I asked, the more it reinforced his beliefs in relation to his problem.

As he became so upset, I ended the solution-focused work and provided support and reassurance. I reflected on some of the principles of the solution-focused work and used this to remove the responsibility away from him. In particular I explained that it was OK if he didn't know how to answer a question; that it was no reflection on him, just that I myself needed to find another way to help him think about things. This seemed to help; he became noticeably calmer and agreed to come back for another session.

At the next session he turned up and admitted to feeling nervous about not having answers again. I began by showing him a room that is often used with younger children. It has lots of

creative things in it like Play-Doh, markers, pens, paper, sand tray and figures. I had also set up a 'casual' seating area on the floor with beanbags, in addition to the table and chairs already in the room. I spent some time explaining various ways in which the materials could be used to help him visualise his preferred future and, following this, he chose to work in this room. He started to play around with the sand while I encouraged him to focus on his feelings and after a while he remarked "Oh, this is really soothing, isn't it?"

At this point I reintroduced the concept of the preferred future. He began by using the figures to act it out and his nerves visibly reduced significantly as he progressed with this task. It was also noted that he became more chatty and animated. He then stated that he felt OK to just talk now and decided to sit down on the bean bags. Pens and paper and Play-Doh were available and it had been explained earlier that if he got stuck it could be helpful to doodle or draw, mould the Play-Doh or just start writing. A few times during the session when I asked him a question, he would doodle and draw, but mostly he used the clay to make various figures while talking. In contrast to the first session, this appeared to help him remain relaxed, which subsequently enabled him to answer questions. By the end of the session he'd described his preferred future in detail and had been able to articulate a very clear idea of what differences achieving his best hopes would make to his life.

I was working with a 10-year-old girl who wanted to improve her relationship with her dad. We were thinking about how she could paint a picture of her preferred future, and she was really into computer games, so she wanted to create a computer game of her ideal life.

She drew it all out on big pieces of paper. We talked about if she was playing this computer game from start to finish, what would happen and how she would know that she'd reached her preferred future.

This became the way that we did scaling. She was really imaginative and she created a game that had seven different levels. The seventh level of the game was her preferred future.

She also identified her strengths and tools within the game. For example, "Talk more" was her zapper tool for overcoming challenges in the game.

This became a great tool for overcoming setbacks. One week she came in and said that she'd had a really bad week. So we looked at some of her previous drawings and talked about how she'd got from level two of the game to level three last time. She went away feeling reassured that she would be able to move forward in the game.

By the end of our work, she had reached level five in her game.

## Tool: Waving a magic wand

If a wizard waved a magic wand and cast a spell, so that suddenly your best hopes all happened in a way that was exactly how you wanted it, but you did not know that the wizard had done this...

- What would be the first thing you noticed that told you that the wizard had used his magic wand to make your best hopes happen?
- What would you be doing?
- What would other people notice?



## Tool: The miracle day part 1

### Ask the child

“Suppose a miracle happens when you are asleep tonight so that [insert their best hopes] has happened, but you do not know that this miracle has happened because you are asleep. When you wake up tomorrow morning...”

- How would you know that the miracle has happened?
- What would you notice?
- What would other people notice?

Encourage the child to add as much detail as possible to their description and to write or draw these details on their worksheet (please find a blank copy in the appendix).



## Tool: The miracle day part 2

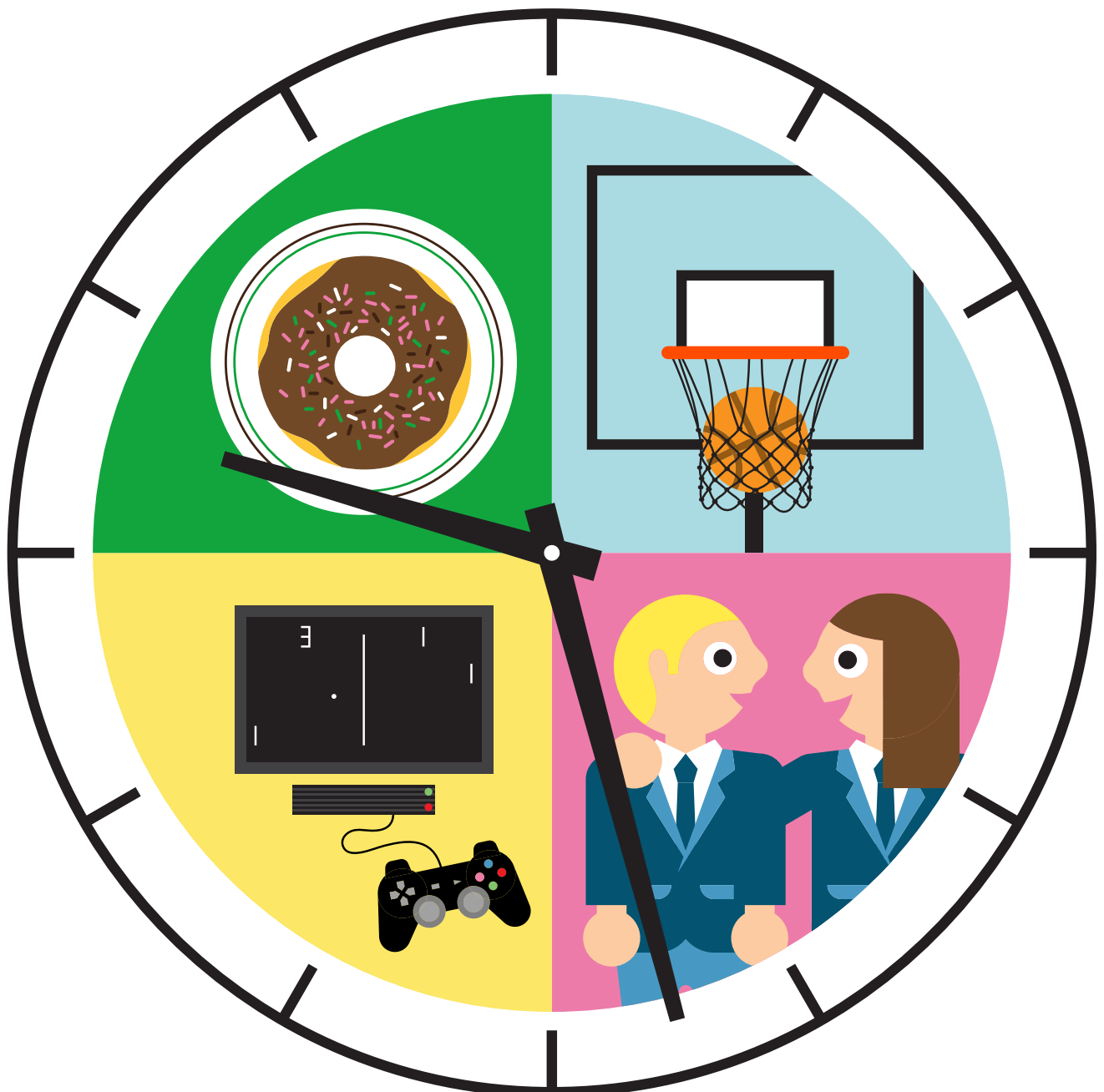
### Ask the young person:

**"If you woke up tomorrow and found that a miracle had occurred, so that your hopes were already a reality, what would tomorrow be like?"**

- What would you notice
- How would you feel?
- What differences would you notice?
- What would you do when you woke up?
- How would your day be different from a normal day?

- What would happen at each stage of that day?
- What would other people notice?

Encourage the child to add as much detail as possible to their description and to write or draw these details on their worksheet (please find a blank copy in the appendix).

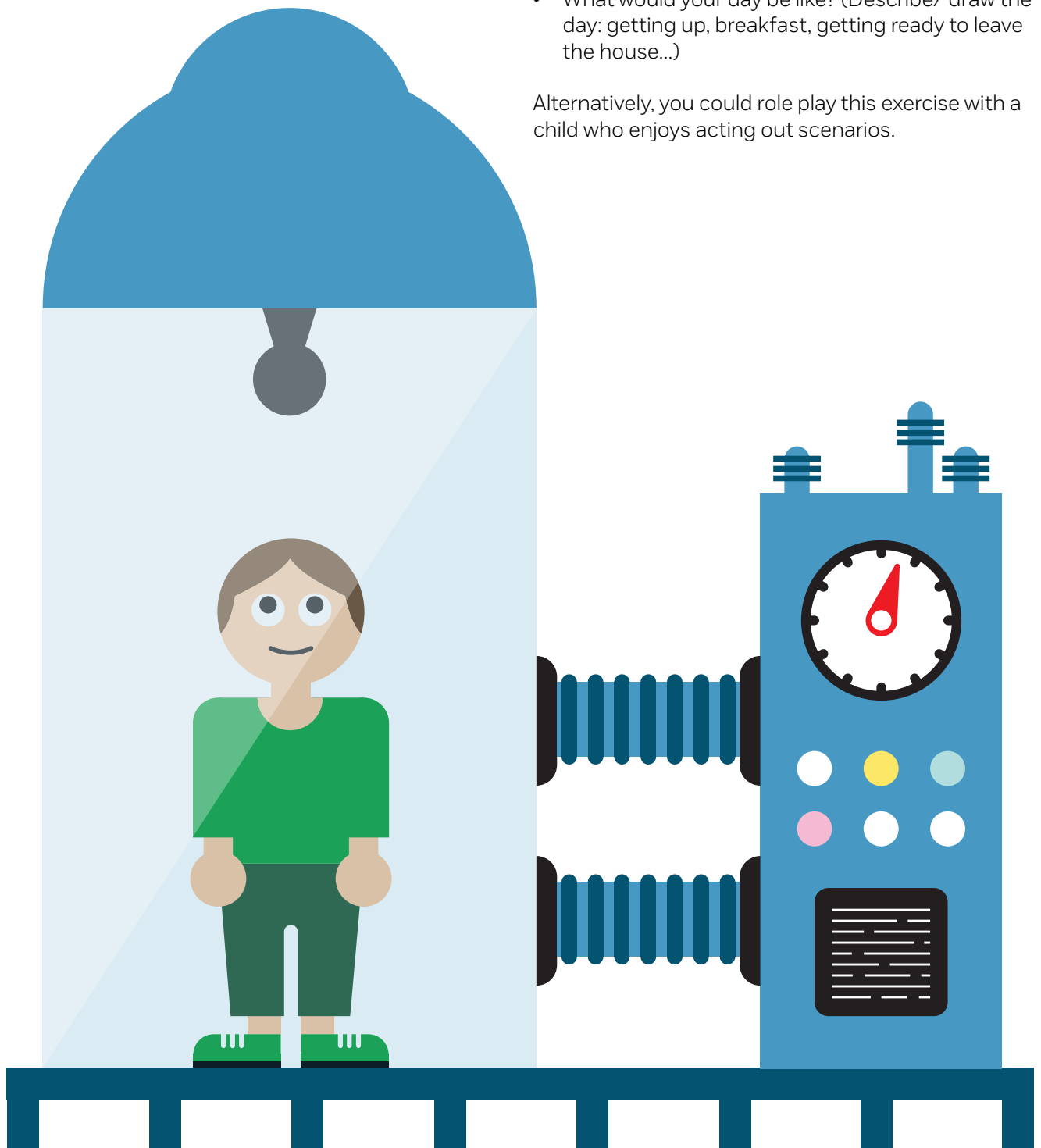


## Activity: Drawing a time machine

Ask the child to draw a picture of a time machine (this is a machine that can magically take you forward into the future).

- Now, draw yourself getting out of the time machine
- The time machine has taken you to a point in the future when things are how you would like them to be
- What is it like when you leave the time machine?
- What would your day be like? (Describe/ draw the day: getting up, breakfast, getting ready to leave the house...)

Alternatively, you could role play this exercise with a child who enjoys acting out scenarios.



## Activity: Play-acting the child's preferred future or using props

Some children may prefer acting out their preferred future to drawing or writing. Based on your knowledge of the child, their interests and their solution team, consider what approach might engage them best.

### Play acting

Some children might enjoy play-acting their 'miracle day'; waking up in their bed, discovering that the miracle has occurred and then acting how they might behave on that day and what they might do. You could play-act the response of people around the child and ask the child how they would expect relevant people (for example, their carer, teacher or friend) to respond.

### What would your cat notice?

If the child has a pet or likes animals, you could ask them what they would notice about the child (once the child's best hopes are happening). The child could play-act or provide the voice of the animal.

An NSPCC practitioner recalls a child she worked with who was living with her foster carer and talked a lot about her foster carer's cat called Bruce. She found it to be very successful when she asked:

**'What would Bruce notice about you once you have what you hope for?'** The child enjoyed describing this scene from Bruce's point of view.

### Using puppets or other props

The child may enjoy talking about, or acting out, their preferred future through puppets, figurines or other props.

## Activity: Using the sand tray

Using a sand tray and a selection of toy figures, ask the child to create a scene, showing what their preferred future would look like:

- Who would be there?
- What would you be doing?
- What would other people notice?

This activity might work well alongside or following an exercise to identify the child's solutions team, as the child may wish to include members of their solutions team in the scene they create.



## Activity: Writing a letter from the future

This exercise may be appropriate for an older child or young person.

Ask the child or young person to write to himself/herself from a future time, when their life is going well for them (for example, when they are closer to their best hopes or when their best hopes are happening).

Please refer to Yvonne Dolan's book *One Small Step* for a more detailed discussion of this technique (Dolan, 2000). Dolan has also suggested that this 'miracle letter' could be addressed to a friend or somebody else the person is close to. The important thing is to describe in detail what is good about their life in this preferred future.

- What does this future self want to tell the person who is you now?
- In what ways is this future a good place to be?
- What has changed?
- What advice might you, from this future place, want to give the younger you now?





# 5

## **Working toward the preferred future: instances, exceptions and scaling questions**

# Working toward the preferred future: instances, exceptions and scaling questions

## Introduction

A great deal of solution-focused work will be about working with the child or young person to identify behaviours and activities that are already helping them move towards their preferred future, and that can help them move closer still.

For example, a child may want to get on better with their foster carer. In one session, the child may identify that they get on better with their foster carer when they help out a bit more. Then between sessions they may practice times of doing this. At the next session they may report back on how this helped, who noticed and how this left them feeling, and can consider what else they are doing that is making a difference, and what other small differences might look like.

Instances, exceptions and scaling questions are important aspects of the process for solution-focused work.

## Instances

An instance refers to an aspect of the preferred future that has already happened or is happening. Discussion of instances will help the child to stay close to the positive vision of their preferred future, and to consider how they are already moving towards their hopes. It is preferable to discuss the preferred future in relation to instances rather than exceptions, as exceptions are framed in relation to the problem, whereas instances are framed in relation to the solution.

If a young person's best hope was to get on better with her mum, an example of an instance might be "This week I was able to stay downstairs and watch TV with my mum and we got on OK".

This activity might work well alongside or following an exercise to identify the child's solutions team, as the child may wish to include members of their solutions team in the scene they create.

## Exceptions

It can be useful to discuss exceptions in situations where a child or young person is very stuck in talking about their problems and is struggling to describe their preferred future. It might also be useful in a follow-up session if the child is finding it hard to discuss "what is better" and is talking about problems that have occurred since the last meeting. In these circumstances, it might be helpful for them to think about exceptions to these situations, when the problem was not a problem.

This process can help the child to recognise that the problem is not a problem all the time, and to think of ways that they can build on their existing strengths and coping skills.

Following on from the previous example, an example of an exception might be "This week I was able to stay downstairs and watch TV with my mum and we didn't have an argument that day".

## Scaling questions

Scaling questions are a means of eliciting examples of instances and exceptions. During this stage you are looking for "news of difference" when parts of the preferred future are already happening. In doing this it is useful to introduce a scaling activity; making the top of the scale the child or young person's preferred future and the bottom of the scale as remote from the preferred future as possible. When the child or young person chooses a value on the scale to represent where they feel they are now in relation to their preferred future, the number itself is not important to the worker, although of course it is to the child. The worker is not assessing the child here, and is not evaluating the meaning of the number. The number only becomes meaningful when the detail is shared by the child or young person of what the number means for them and what it says about what is already taking place.

# Working toward the preferred future: instances, exceptions and scaling questions (continued)

The key function of the scaling is that the child or young person is supported to express the finer details of where they are now and what they are already doing in relation to their preferred future. This description will undoubtedly start to introduce instances and exceptions that can be explored further and built upon.

Scaling questions are used to break down the preferred future into small actions/steps, thus asking the child or young person to describe what one step on the scale looks like and what a step up the scale would look like.

It is important not to move up the scale too quickly, and to draw out a lot of detail about what the child is doing to be at the point they have reached on the scale (this is one of the hardest aspects of practising the approach). By focusing on what the child is already doing that is working, the child will be better able to do more of this, to find other strategies and try new ideas, and sometimes even to realise that they are already further up the scale than they thought.

For example, if the child or young person is currently at number three on the scale, you might ask them "What are you doing to be at number three rather than two or one?"

## Things to consider

### Listening for instances and exceptions

- When the child or young person is talking, listen out for moments when they give aspects of their preferred future that have already happened.
- Make sure to reflect these examples back to the child or young person.
- Also ask the young person to try and notice, between sessions, their own examples of moments when they did something or managed in a way that was helpful to them (see also the activities and tools in the 'problem-free talk' section).
- Where there are setbacks (for example, the child is at a lower number than last week), you may want to focus on what the child did to stop them falling even further down.
- It may be necessary to discuss the difference between things that are within the child's control (for example, their own behaviour and actions) and things that are not.

# Working toward the preferred future: instances, exceptions and scaling questions (continued)

## Scaling exercises

- Some children and young people have communicated a sense of realistic expectation and suggested that they do not think that they will be able to reach the top of the scale. With all scaling it is important to ask what they would be happy with, what would that look like and so on.
- Some children may work well with numbers, others may want visual representations of scales that do not involve numbers (for example, the 'climbing a mountain' tool).
- Visual tools can be used to start a conversation.
- Coping skills, strengths, instances or exceptions can be drawn directly onto a paper worksheet.
- The same tool could be used each week, with a different figure added to represent the child on that day.

## Tools to use with children and young people in working toward the preferred future

- Instances of my preferred future: explanation
- Instances of my preferred future: tool
- Climbing a mountain: explanation
- Climbing a mountain : tool
- Climbing the ladder: explanation
- Climbing the ladder: tool
- Taking off: explanation
- Taking off: tool
- Cartoon strip: explanation
- Cartoon strip: tool

## Activities to use with children and young people in working toward the preferred future

- Scaling with physical objects: explanation
- Active scaling: explanation

## Some examples from NSPCC's Face to Face service

Patrick was 16. When scaling, he was unable to identify with picking a number up to 10; he couldn't get his head around it at all.

I suggested various other options including drawing a line in the sand tray and placing figures along that line or making a path to his preferred future out of paper and walking along to where he felt he was.

The option he chose to use, however, was to draw a line on a piece of paper, one end of which is his preferred future and each session using a different coloured marker he would mark the line according to how close he felt to his preferred future. This appeared to minimise any pressure as he didn't have to name it, or give it a number and anything else like that; however, it was beneficial as it offered a visual representation of his changing perceptions.

One session that this scaling activity particularly helped was at a point when he had experienced a difficult week. He presented as nervous and annoyed that things weren't as good as they had been the week before and was criticising himself. Following scaling, he was able to see the marks he'd made over the sessions and I invited him to share what he noticed.

First of all, he said "I've gone down". So I said, "OK, so you've gone down today, but what else can you see from looking at that?" Eventually it seemed to just click with him that the mark, although lower than last session, remained considerably higher than it was at the start of the work. Then by asking how, despite having had a difficult week, he had managed to keep going, the conversation shifted. He was able to focus on positives, his nerves disappeared and during check out he reported feeling very positive about things.

## Some examples from NSPCC's Face to Face service (continued)

We had a young Asian girl called Leila who was 10 years old. Her level of understanding was probably a bit younger than her age. She was referred to the service after an incident of domestic violence. The referrers were concerned because she was very nervous around other children. Sometimes she would act out if she was feeling threatened.

What she wanted from the work was to feel more confident around other children and she wanted to get on better with her sister. We did a crystal ball colouring sheet about what's inside the crystal ball in her preferred future.

When we were looking at how she was working towards her preferred future we did a lot of identifying strengths. We got the strengths cards out and she would pick these pictures, colourful animals. I'd say "What strengths do you think you've got and can you tell me how you've used that strength?" It keeps it really positive. I also asked her if she could pick out some of her sister's strengths, so that she could see that not everything was negative with her sister.

We also did a lot of scaling. She really enjoyed scaling. Sometimes we would do it by drawing stairs from 1 to 10 and asking her where she felt

she was at the moment. Or sometimes we'd do it by running across the room – so this end of the room is really rubbish and this end is really brilliant, whereabouts do you feel that you are? She'd physically place herself where she felt she was. I've done this with quite a few young people and you can say, "So what number do you think that is?" – we did quite a lot of that. And I'm saying, "OK, so where do you want to be on the scale? If you were to move one up, what do you think that would be like? How might that be and what might change?"

When I first met her she was really shy and she wasn't even looking at me. But I started to see improvements as we were doing the work. She started to make eye contact, she was laughing, and she was asking questions like "What are we doing this for?"

She started to say that she was feeling less anxious and she was getting on better with her sister, apart from the odd flare up. Her family were really pleased and the school reported that she was less likely to freak out if the other kids were getting noisy. So there were definitely improvements there. I think she really enjoyed the structure of the solution-focused approach; it was really helpful for her.

## Some examples from NSPCC's Face to Face service (continued)

Damien wasn't really into doing worksheets or anything like that. He was sensitive to being singled out from other children or being told what to do, so what we did do at one point was make leaflets for other young people. When we were talking about what were the things that help to have a calm, relaxed atmosphere at home, we'd talk about how he stays calm: "How do you do that? How do you express your feelings without starting on someone, how do you relax with them?" Then I'd say "What do you think other young people should know about staying calm and expressing their feelings safely?"

Then Damien turned this into an information leaflet for other young people. That worked really well, he liked that because it didn't make him feel like he was different.

Also, some concerns around sexualised behaviour in Damien's peer group cropped up during this piece of work, which needed to be addressed. So we worked through these issues in a similar way, by making an information leaflet about how young people could keep themselves safe.

With the eight-year-old girl who loved One Direction, we used the ladder image from this toolkit to determine where she was and how she could get to her preferred future (she wanted to be really well behaved so that everybody was pleased with her).

For the first few sessions, she was at the top of the ladder, so I was thinking "Where do you go from here if you're already at the top?" So with the use of One Direction, we talked about what could be beyond the top of the ladder, and she said "Well there'd be someone from One Direction beyond there" and that's where she wanted to go, where it was even better than the top of the ladder or number 10 on the scale. So we managed to develop a way of things being better than 10 so that she had something to aim for.

One little boy, he liked football so we drew a football pitch. Then he made the football characters and numbered them so we had ten players on there. I said, "You put them on the pitch", so he felt that it was his scale. It wasn't my scale, he owned it.

He wanted to get from 0 to 8 with his relationship with his brother. So we used the same sheet throughout so he could see when he'd got to an 8 for him.

When we ended the last session he asked me, "Can I have that?" and so I laminated it for him and sent it off to him in the post. I think he wanted to remember how he'd got from one end of the pitch to the other end of the pitch really.

We created a scale that looked like a garden with flowers and butterflies in it. She would move a counter to show where she was in the garden that day.

## Tool: Instances of my preferred future

Ask the child to think of recent examples of when aspects of their preferred future were already happening, and to write these inside the stars.





## Tool: Climbing a mountain

If reaching the top of this mountain means that you have achieved what you want from our work together, where are you on the mountain now?

You could give the child pens, stickers, counters or other markers to place on the drawing.



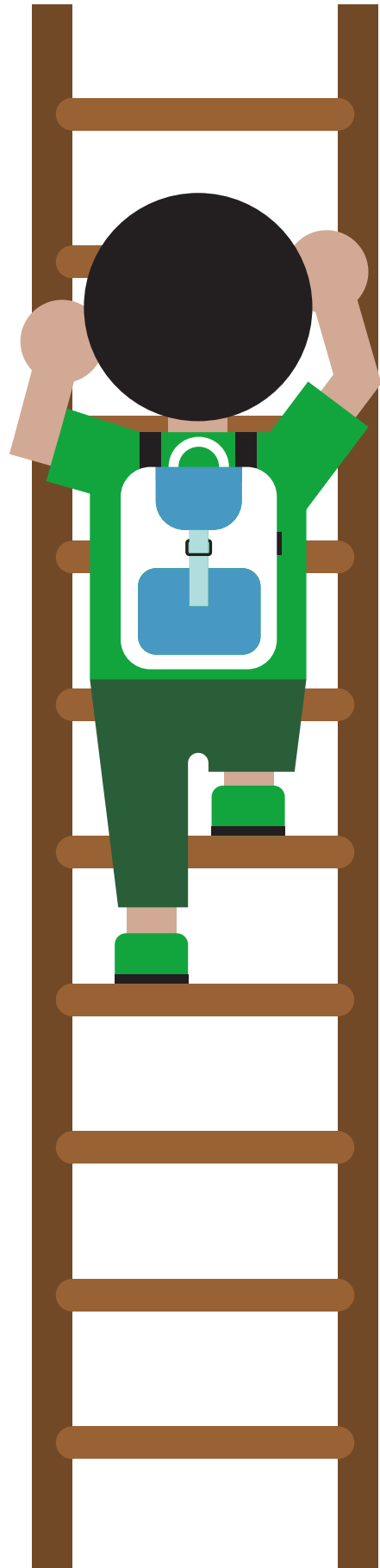
## Tool: Climbing the ladder

### Where are you on this ladder?

The top rung means you have got to where you want to be.

The bottom rung means you are far away from reaching what you want.

Zero out of 10 is below the first rung on the ladder.



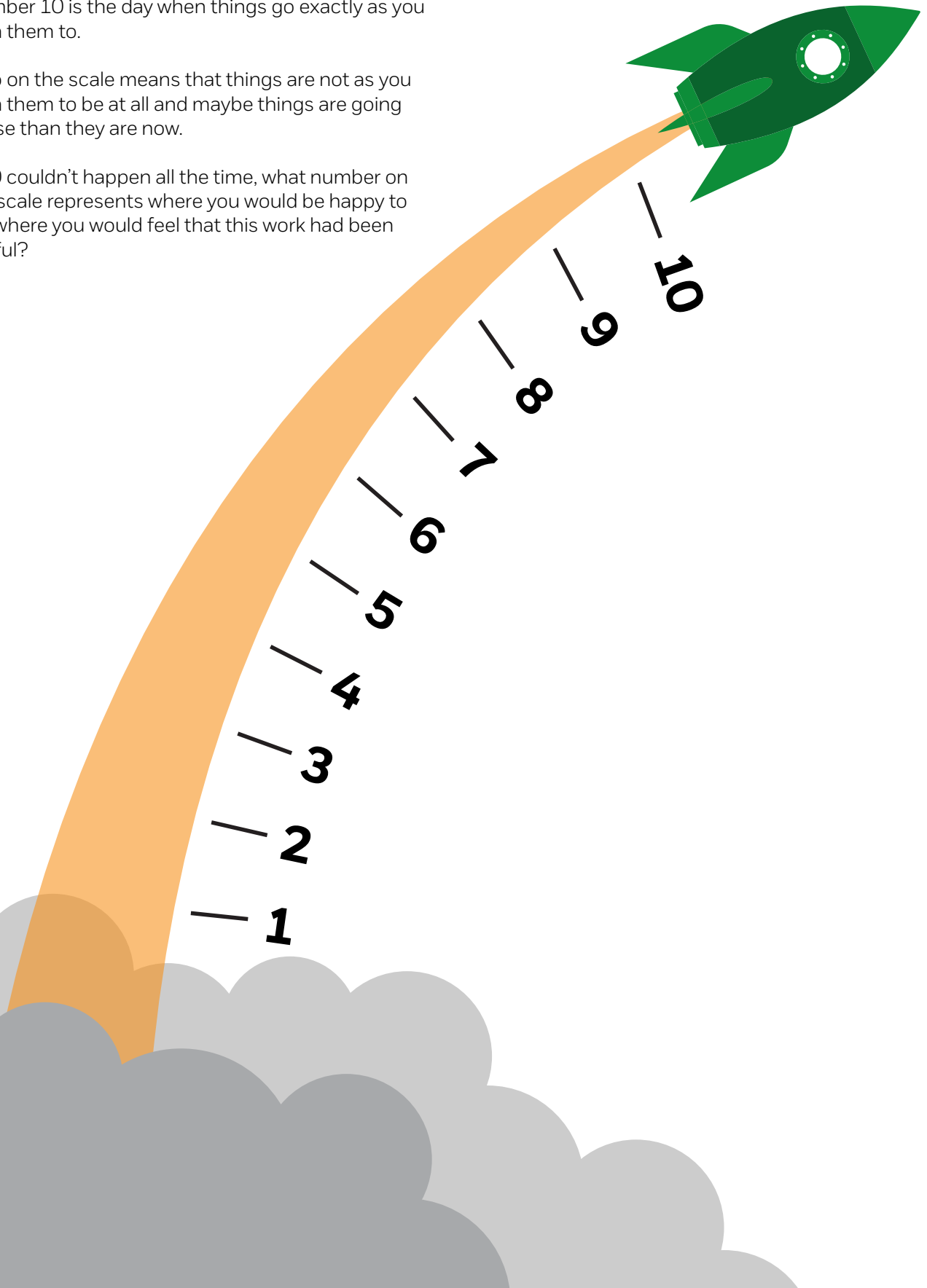
## Tool: Taking off...

### Where are you on this scale?

Number 10 is the day when things go exactly as you wish them to.

Zero on the scale means that things are not as you wish them to be at all and maybe things are going worse than they are now.

If 10 couldn't happen all the time, what number on the scale represents where you would be happy to be, where you would feel that this work had been useful?

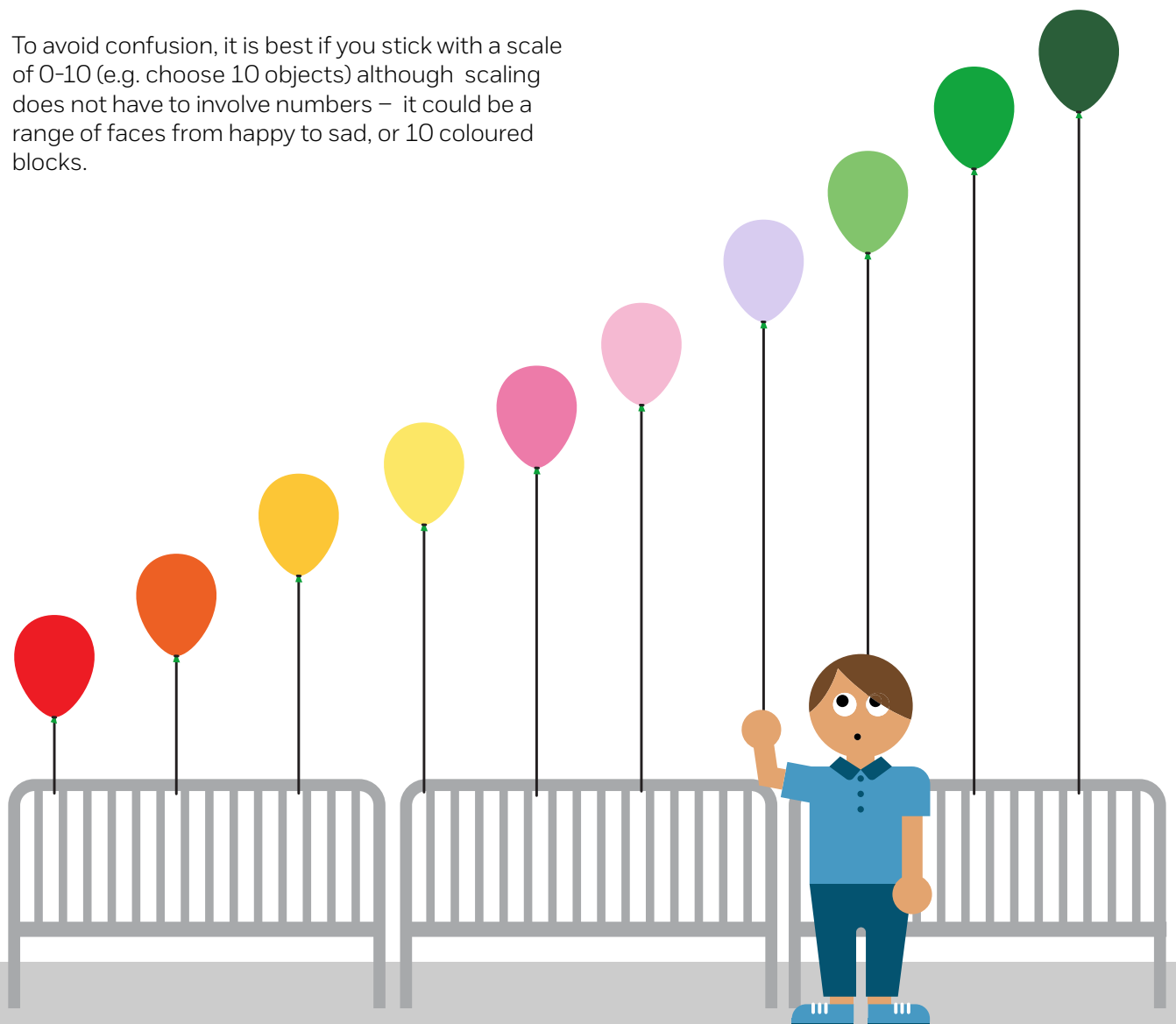


## Activity: Scaling with physical objects

To bring the scale to life for a younger child, you could use physical objects that appeal to them, such as:

- Ten balloons
- Wooden blocks or lego (stacking or building stairs; you could use a toy or figure to represent the child)
- A row of toy cars
- A jar or bottle, marked with a scale; the child fills the bottle with water or sand up to the correct mark
- A row of 10 buttons (these could be ordered according to size or attractiveness)

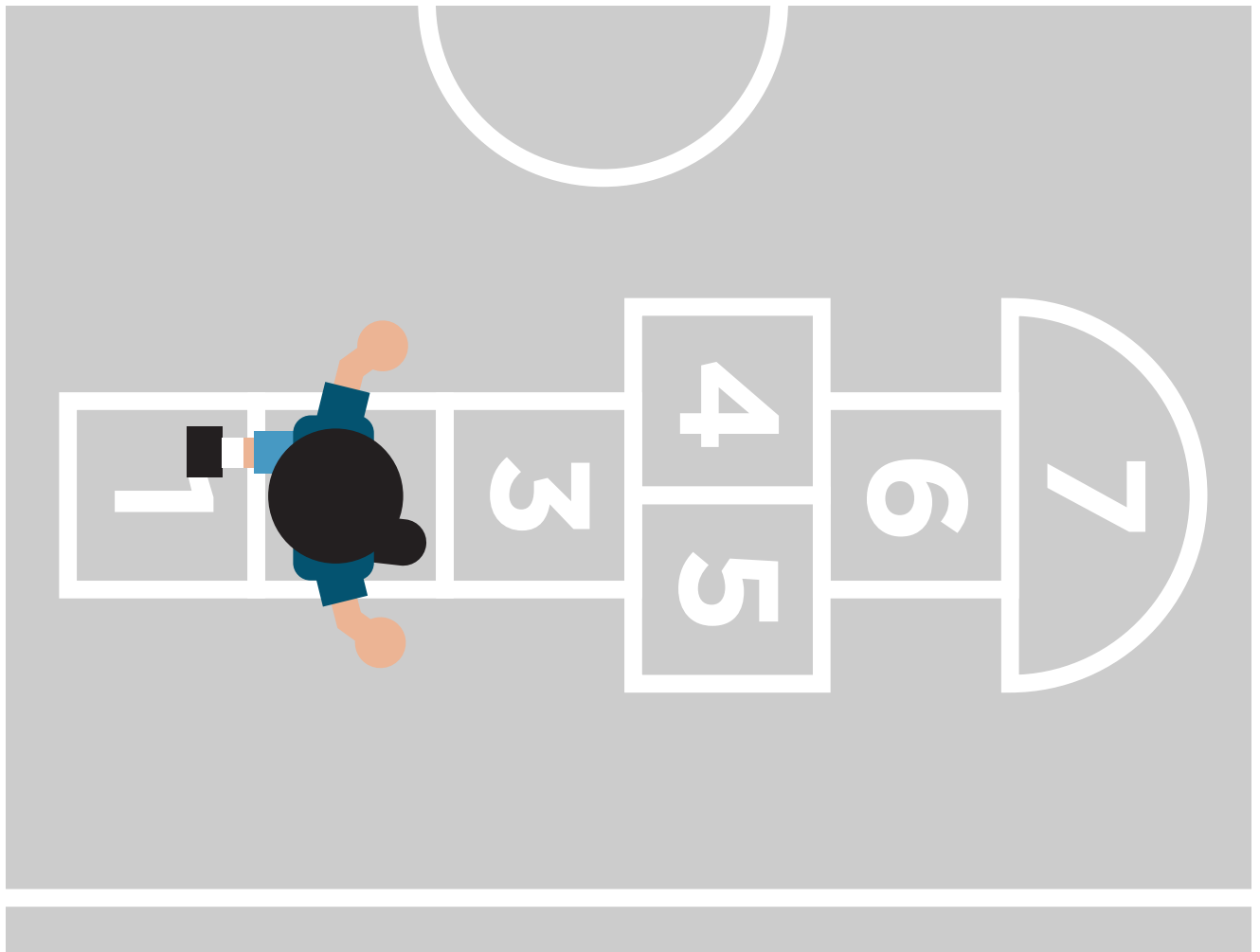
To avoid confusion, it is best if you stick with a scale of 0-10 (e.g. choose 10 objects) although scaling does not have to involve numbers – it could be a range of faces from happy to sad, or 10 coloured blocks.



## Activity: Active scaling

A more active child may prefer a scale that requires them to move around rather than talking or drawing. You could use:

- A staircase: the top step represents their best hopes. Where are they now?
- A room: this end of the room is their preferred future, the other end is as bad as things could be.
- Laminated pictures of pool balls – place them in a row and the child steps onto the right numbered picture.
- Outside: this tree is zero, the other tree is 10. Run to the place between the two trees that represents where you are now!
- Sports grounds: a basketball court or football pitch.
- Hopscotch or skipping.



# 6

## The solution team

# The solution team

## Introduction

The 'solution team' is a term for describing people in the child or young person's life who support them and will be able to help them work towards achieving their best hopes. Members of the solution team may include parents or carers, siblings and teachers at school.

Following discussion of the child's best hopes and preferred future, it may be a helpful exercise to ask who they would choose to put in their solution team. You can then discuss how the child can draw on these sources of support to help them move in the right direction.

It may be appropriate, particularly with younger children, to ask if they want to involve a parent or carer in the work. Ways that a parent/carer or other member of the child's network may be able to help include:

- Being aware of the child's best hopes and encouraging the child to stick to the strategies they have identified
- Noticing when the child makes progress between sessions and providing positive feedback
- In some cases, attending the first session and/or subsequent sessions to help put the child at ease and facilitate communication between the child and the worker (this may be particularly relevant with younger children or children with learning difficulties).

## Things to consider

To help identify members of the solution team, questions to ask the child or young person might include:

- Who do you like being with?
- Who helps you already?
- Who can help you to move towards your best hopes?
- Who might notice positive changes that you are making?
- Is there anybody you would like me to talk to, to explain our work together?

You will need to discuss with the child how they would like to tell people that they are part of their solution team. This may be something the child wants to do, or they may find it helpful if you have this conversation for them, explaining to the person that the child has identified how they can be of help. With the child's permission, you could then keep members of the solution team informed throughout the work and explain how they can help to reinforce the progress the child is making, in between sessions.

It may also be useful toward the end of the work to identify with the child or young person who else they can look to for support and encouragement once the work has ended. The child may find it helpful to bring a member of their solution team into their last session, to share their celebration of the progress they have made and to reassure them that they will continue to be supported after the work has ended.

## Tools to help the child or young person identify their solution team

- The helping hand: explanation
- The helping hand: tool
- My solution team: explanation
- My solution team: tool
- Who is important to me: explanation
- Who is important to me: tool

## Activities to help the child or young person identify their solution team

- Drawing your solution team: explanation
- Using buttons to describe the solution team: explanation

## Case example

Jenny was eight and she was a bright, bright girl – numbers were her key. But her school hadn't seen that, all they could see was this girl that would kick off and all the kids were scared of her really.

The key element for her was that she saw herself as the naughty girl and we needed to break that down so she could see herself as something other than naughty. And I remember doing a session where I drew around her and she started to put really negative stuff on it and I was like "Come on, I don't see that..."

Looking at what her hopes might be, she said that she wanted the school and her teachers and people to see her in a positive light. So I said "OK, so how do we achieve that?" So we did some work looking at how Jenny would like teachers at her school to respond to her and what she was doing when teachers were pleased with her.

Then, with Jenny's permission, I did some work with the school to help them change how they perceived her. We explored ideas for how she could have a more positive role at school and they gave her a role in a buddy system where she would go in the playground and wear a tabard, which she thought was fantastic – her idea! – and she'd help with the younger children. It was fantastic to see her self-esteem grow, the fact that the smaller children were coming to her and now she wasn't seen as the naughty girl. She was absolutely skipping in, you wouldn't think it was the same child.

One boy I worked with in the Face to Face service was getting bullied at school. His hopes from the work were to stop being bullied and have friends. When our work started, the boy's foster carer had already told the school about the bullying but the school had said he wasn't getting bullied. So nothing had really changed for him.

Through this work I did a 'helping hand' exercise with the boy and asked him who helps him. He said that his foster carer was on his helping hand, so we talked about how his foster carer could help him. I asked for his permission to discuss the bullying with his foster carer. With the foster carer I went back to the school and we asked them to address the bullying. This time they took it on board.

So I think the solution team exercises are about showing the child that they can ask for help. It is important as part of this work that the members of the child's solution team understand their role and how they can help. I think after we had talked, the foster carer was more aware of what they needed to do, to make sure that the school were taking their concerns on board.



## Tool: The helping hand

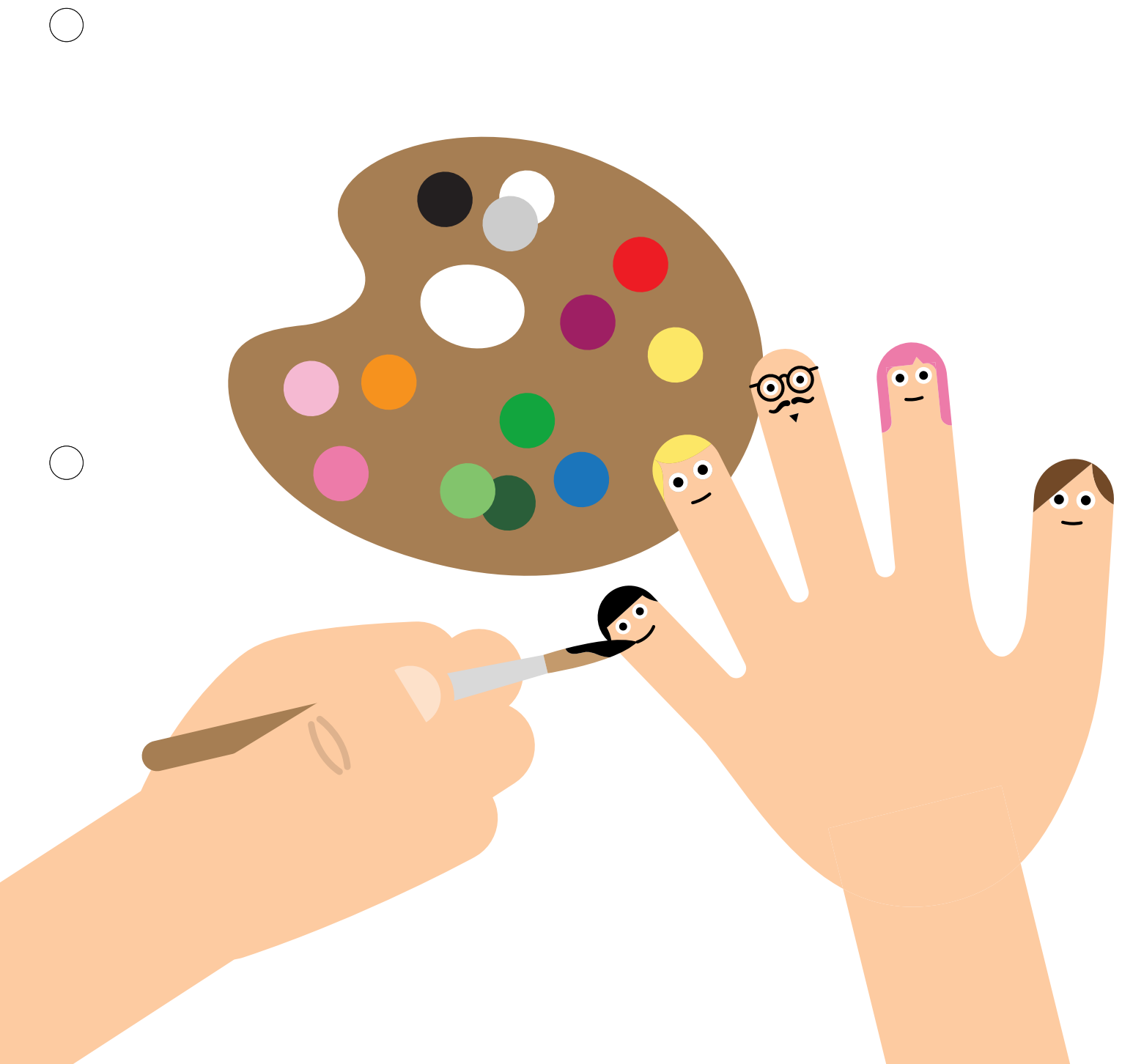
### Ask the child:

**Who could help you to move closer to your preferred future? The child can then draw or paint on the hand to describe members of their 'solution team'.**

They might paint a different face on each finger and label the fingers to say who they are. Each finger represents somebody who helps them.

They could draw their preferred future in the palm of the hand, or draw a face to represent himself/herself.

Please find the blank 'helping hand' worksheet in the appendix.



## Tool: My solution team

### Who can help you to move closer to your hopes?

Think about who can help you do more of what works and move you closer to how you want to be.



### How can these people help you?

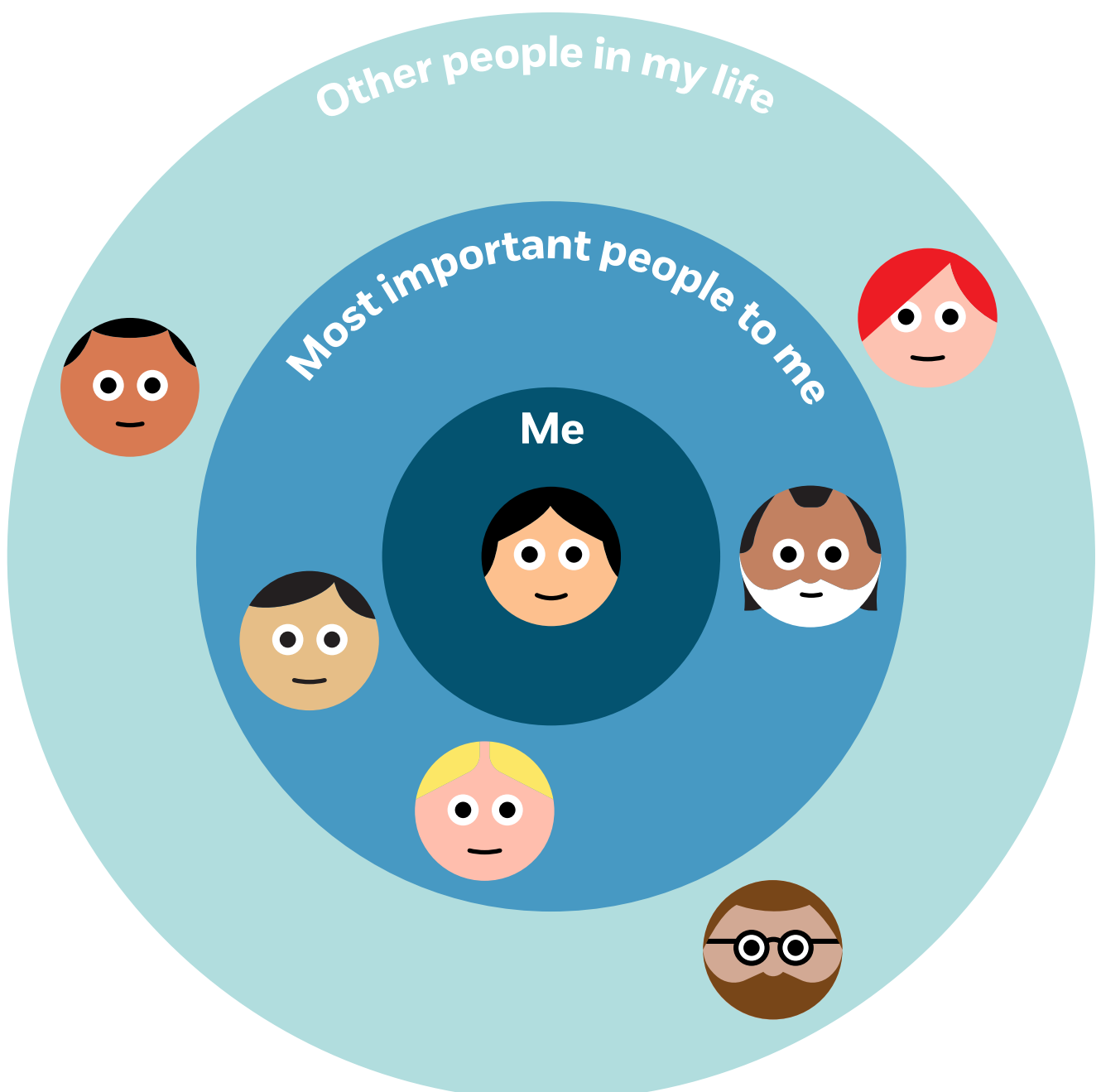


## Tool: Who is important to me

Ask the child to draw himself/herself at the centre of the circles, and then map out:

- The people who are closest to them (drawn nearer the centre of the circle, the more important they are to the child or young person)
- Other people in their life – placed further away from the centre if they are less important to the child

Use this as a tool to discuss the people in the child's life who can help them to achieve their best hopes, and how they can be of help.



## Activity: Drawing your solution team

### Questions:

- Who can help you to move toward your hopes?
- Who notices positive things that you are doing?

### Instructions:

- Ask the child to draw a picture of members of their solution team
- Ask the child to draw a picture of someone helping them
- How is this person helping?



## Activity: Using buttons to describe the solution team

Provide a mixed selection of buttons of different shapes and sizes. Ask the child to select buttons to represent different family members, carers or friends who can help them move towards their best hopes.

The child could also potentially decorate the buttons using paint, pens or glitter.

How does the button represent a quality of that person?

Which people (represented by buttons) will help the child to achieve their best hopes? How do they help?

You could also use stones, marbles or toy cars – any object that appeals to the child.



# 7

## Building on success

# Building on success

## Introduction

It is important to note that a lot of the key work that the child or young person is doing will be taking place in between sessions. Berg and Steiner (2003) refer to 'homework' and 'experiments' as ways that the child or young person can build on their achievements and strategies in between sessions.

## Ending sessions

The endings of sessions are opportunities to help a child or young person sum up what they have learned during the meeting and to consider how they might put these insights into practice during the time before your next meeting. The 'checklist' activity may be one way to help the child get involved with this summing up process, and to give them a reminder of what they can focus on in the coming days.

It is also valuable to offer the child appreciation for the efforts they have made during the session and the ideas and strategies they have identified.

At the end of the session, it may be helpful to discuss what the child will try to practice or 'notice' before the next session. You may want to discuss a way that they can record times when this happens as 'moments of success' in between sessions. This may be something that a member of their solution team could be involved with (for example, noticing when the child is exhibiting positive behaviours that they are working on and making a note of this).

## Follow-up sessions

Follow-up sessions should start with asking the child or young person to reflect on what has changed for the better since the last meeting. What strategies that they have used worked well?

To help personalise the experience for the child and make this feel like a cohesive piece of work, it can be helpful to use the child's own language and 'in-jokes' to show them that you have remembered what they told you last time. It is often useful to bring the child's work from previous sessions with you, so that you can refer back to it and build on previous conversations.

## Things to consider

- Resources can be taken from the 'problem-free talk' or 'working toward the preferred future' sections of this toolkit (for example, using strengths cards).
- Using scaling, the young person could identify a place on the scale nearer towards their preferred future and could detail what happens at this place on the scale. Ask the young person if any of the details described are likely to happen between this and the next session, how will they do that, what they know of themselves that will help them and how confident they feel.
- You could set a 'noticing' activity in between sessions, for example, "Please try to notice times when you managed to do something different, such as 'walked away' when feeling frustrated/ felt more confident/was friendly to someone" (depending on the child's preferred future). Ask the child or young person to try to remember some examples to share at the next session.
- You could use the 'My journey' tool to chart the child's progress as they go. Alternatively, you and the child could draw a path on wallpaper, so that the child can physically walk along it.

## Tools for building on success

- Checklist: explanation
- Solutions checklist: tool
- Paint the hand: explanation
- A helping hand: tool
- My journey: tool

## Activities to help the child or young person build on success

- Making an origami fortune teller: explanation
- Making an achievement wall: explanation
- Making a 'moments of success' scrap book: explanation
- Salt jar strategies: explanation

## Case example

I was working with a 10-year-old boy called Michael. He'd been in foster care for about 18 months and he'd had previous experiences of some quite severe neglect. He was able to identify his best hopes: what would make him happy was to be more confident.

To explore his preferred future, we broke it down to look at what feeling more confident would look like and what is a confident person? At the next session I asked him to draw a picture of somebody who might be confident and to list all the confident traits of this ideal person. I think he might have listed out maybe eight or nine.

Then we went through each one of these qualities and said which ones of these does he actually already have? I think going through that list he surprised himself that maybe out of the eight or nine he already had six of them. This almost immediately started him thinking that "Actually, maybe I'm more confident than I initially thought".

A lot of the sessions were then about looking at strengths that he had and how to build on those strengths, so looking at times where he displayed certain characteristics. We were really looking at building his self-esteem and each week we always referred back to that ideal confident person that he created in the initial session.

When we finished the work, I did an activity with him using strengths cards and looking at all of the strengths he had. I finished by giving him a poster of all of these positive attributes, which he could take away with him. It was an affirmation for him of "Look at all these things that I have identified within the sessions" and something to remind him of the work we did together.

His carer commented that he had actually become a bit more outspoken within his placement! That obviously comes hand-in-hand with approaching adolescence anyway, but his foster carer welcomed it because she could see him coming out of himself and having more of a voice.

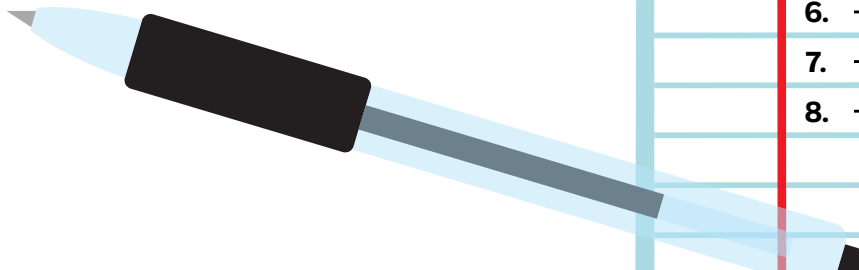


## Tool: Check list

During the session, the child could write or draw a checklist of things they want to do each day to stay on track. Keep this realistic and limit the number of items at the beginning of the work. Include scaling of how confident they feel to implement their own suggestions and use solution-focused questions to explore feeling more confident.

They can then take the checklist with them and hang it in a prominent place at home, to provide a reminder.

The checklist can be discussed at the next session, to explore how they did it, what helped them to do that, what difference it made, and to add or amend the checklist to make it more helpful for the child. Include the child's solution team to help them notice actions from the checklist and feedback to the child/young person.



	1. _____
	2. _____
	3. _____
●	4. _____
	5. _____
	6. _____
	7. _____
	8. _____
●	

## Tool: Paint the hand

Ask the child to draw around their hand, or provide them with the outline of a hand (see the 'a helping hand' worksheet provided in the appendix).

Ask the child to paint each finger a different colour to represent the different strategies they have used to move towards their preferred future. They may want to describe or draw these strategies around the outside of the hand.

In the middle (the palm of their hand) they could paint a face.



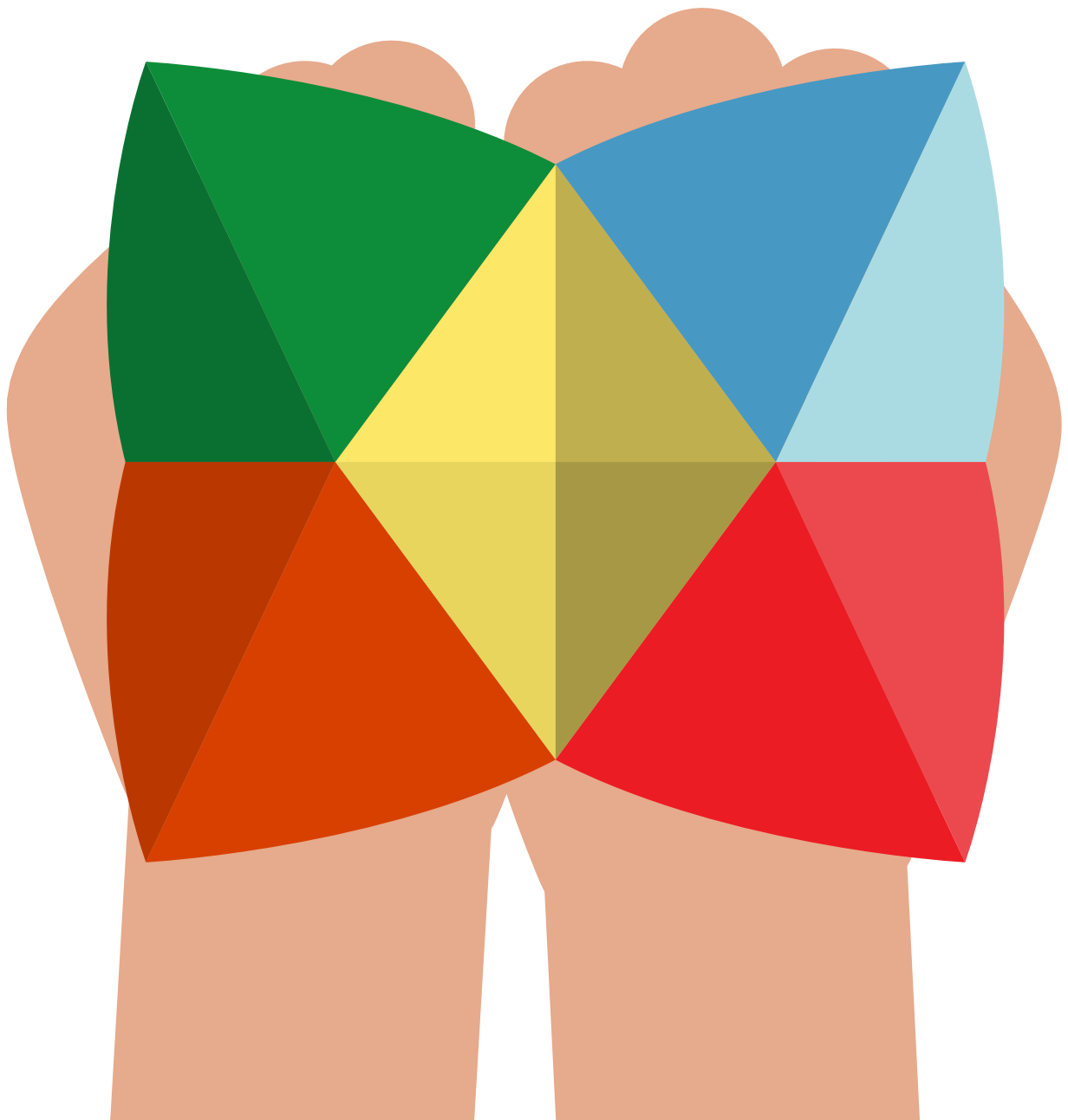
## Activity: Making an origami fortune teller

Make a fortune teller and paint it or decorate it with coloured paper (the resources section of this toolkit provides a link for instructions on how to make it).

Under each leaf of the fortune teller, the young person writes or draws steps that they have taken that will enable them to move towards their preferred future.

This can provide a reminder of changes that they have already made, and instructions for how they can build on these new strategies between sessions.

It could also provide a reminder of what they have learned once the work has come to an end.

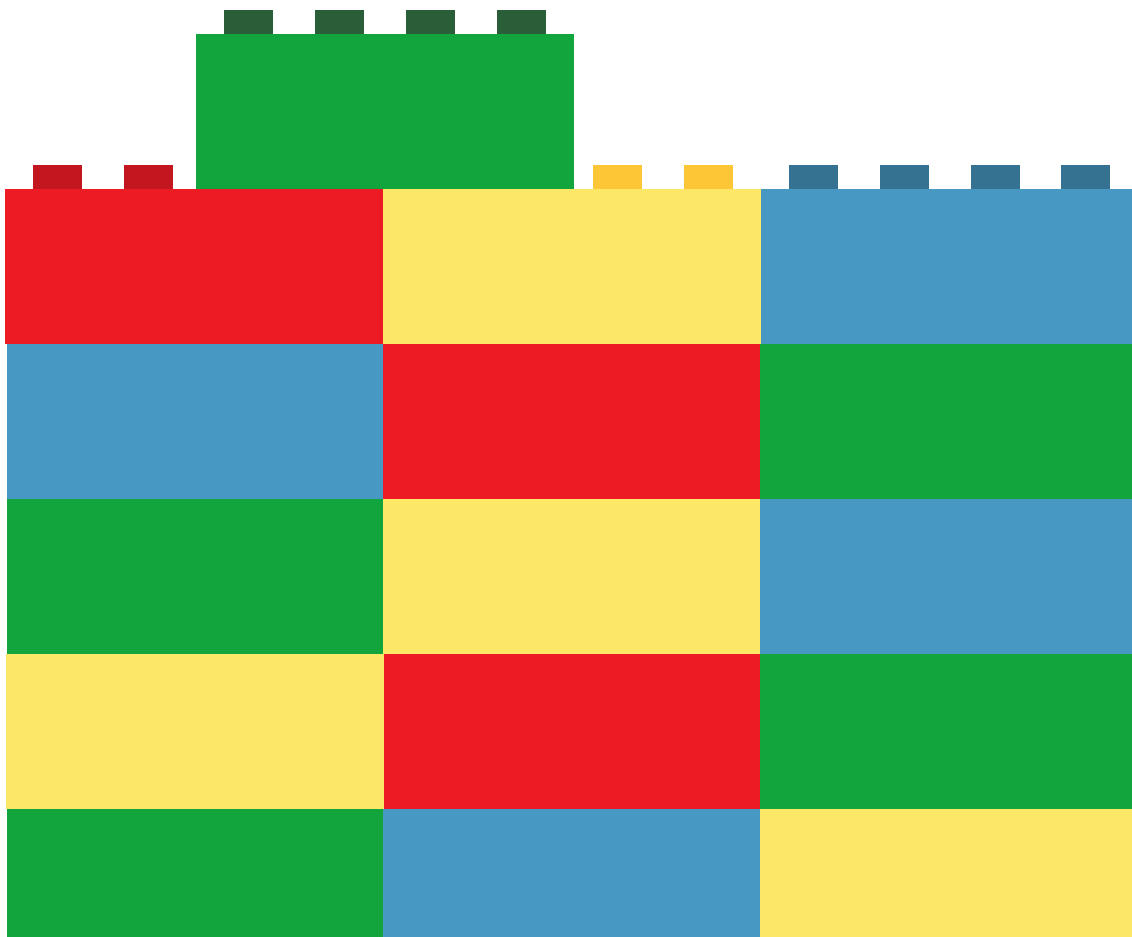
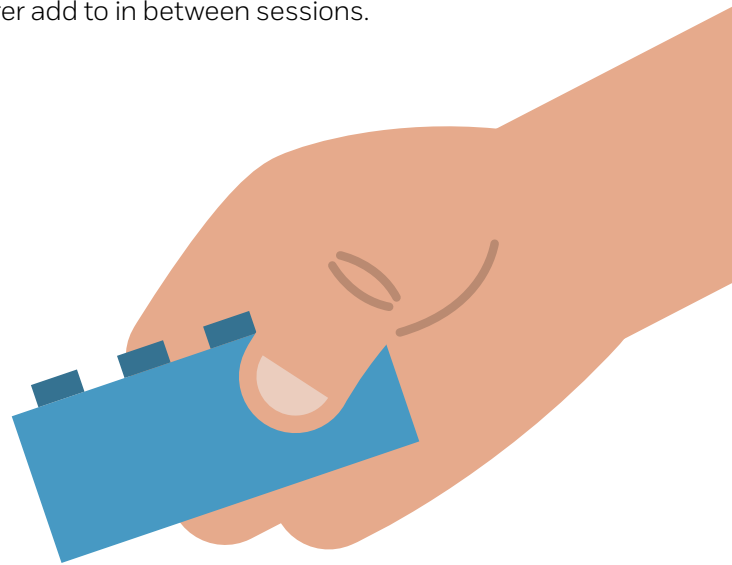


## Activity: Making an achievement wall

The child builds or draws an achievement wall, starting from the bottom and working their way up.

Each brick represents an action, strategy or skill that has been noted in relation to their best hopes or something the child has done that was helpful. The wall could be built during sessions, or it could also be something that the child and their carer add to in between sessions.

At the end of the work, this could provide the child with a reminder of the achievements they have made in moving towards their preferred future, and a reminder of positive skills and strategies to continue with.



## Activity: Making a 'moments of success' scrap book

**Provide the child with a scrap book, which they can decorate to make their own.**

The child or young person brings this scrap book with them to each session.

The child writes or draws in the scrap book something they did, no matter how short the situation was, that they feel was a 'good thing', both in the sessions and outside of them.

If the child/young person has difficulty with this it may help to suggest imagining the past week

from an observer's (third party) point of view. For example, ask the child to imagine being a time travelling detective that goes back in time to the last week and follows the child around to look out for or notice clues of when something went well, no matter how small.

If relevant, ask what a member of the child's solution team may have noticed and ask the child to note this down



## Activity: Salt jar strategies

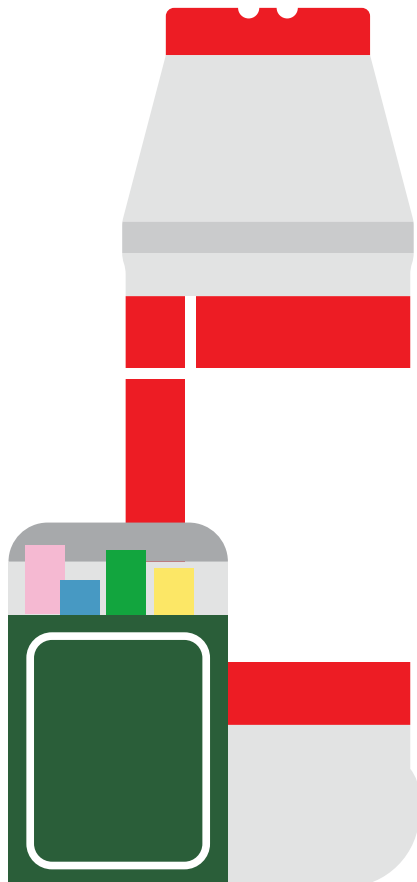
Give the child an empty jar and some jars of coloured salt or sand. Coloured salt can be created by using different coloured chalk to rub over plain salt, which changes the salt into different colours.

The child is asked to identify one of their 'strategies' – something they do to help them move towards their preferred future. For each strategy, they pour a layer of coloured sand into the jar.

Once the jar is full of layers of salt, you pad the top with tissue and superglue the lid shut. Ask the child to write a label explaining what each colour represents.

This could be an activity that takes place each session, reflecting on their achievements since the last session, or an activity that takes place at the end of the work.

You can decorate the jar and lid with ribbons, paints and glitter, and the child can keep it as a reminder of their skill set and aspects of what they do that works.



# 8

## Planning and working toward endings

# Planning and working toward endings

## Introduction

Solution-focused practice is designed to support short-term interventions that empower children and young people. When offering a stand-alone intervention, the solution-focused practitioner is there to help the child or young person in the context of their existing support network (for example, parents, foster carers, teachers or other professionals), but not to replace these important adults.

Within this intervention it remains important for the practitioner to develop a good working relationship with the child or young person within the context of solution-focused practice. Therefore, the practitioner will need to be clear about their particular role in the child's life and the number of sessions available to the child, so that the child is aware that they can choose to end the work when they wish, and is prepared for when the allocated sessions will come to an end.

Practitioners working on the NSPCC's Face to Face service have developed a variety of ideas for introducing this concept into sessions and providing children and young people with reminders of their achievements during the solution-focused work, which they can take away with them.

This section on planning endings may be less relevant to you if you are providing solution-focused support to a child or young person whom you will have an ongoing relationship with (for example, if you are a foster carer or social worker). However, with any solution-focused work it could be useful for the child or young person to have a record of

their strengths, coping skills and achievements they have made, which they can keep after the work has ended.

## Things to consider

Solution-focused practice should be child-led, so it should be the child or young person who decides when things are good enough and when the work is complete (although it may be necessary to limit the total number of sessions that can take place).

Part of the process will be the child or young person reviewing at each meeting where they feel they are in relation to their preferred future and to their need for future sessions. This may include gaining confidence to implement and maintain skills and strategies they have used in moving towards their preferred future. Within a possible restriction of the number of sessions (according to the service model), the decision to have another session always lies with the child or young person. However, the process should support their reflection on how they would know that having had another session had been useful.

It may be a good idea to discuss with the child at an early stage how they would like to keep a record of their work with you. Would they prefer something visual they can display, like a poster or canvas? Or would they prefer something tactile, such as a fortune-teller (see the 'building on success' section) or a box they can close and keep in a safe place.

## Before the last session

- The child or young person will be aware and prepared for the work coming to an end
- They will be able to anticipate which is to be their last session.



# Planning and working toward endings (continued)

## At the last session : consolidation

- Help the child or young person to recap what they have learned.
- Celebrate their achievements and create a record that they can keep (you could give the child a folder of their work to take away at the end, but you may wish to photograph this first to keep a record).
- Discuss 'what's next' and how they will keep building on their progress.
- Discuss the child or young person's solution team – who will help them to keep up their progress? Is there anybody the young person would like to share their work with?
- Remind the child of the resources they have identified, to help them keep moving toward their preferred future.
- Be aware that each session may turn out to be the child's last!

## Tools for planning and working towards endings

- Cartoon strip: explanation
- Cartoon strip: tool


## Activities for planning and working towards endings

- Making a vision board: explanation
- Making a keepsake box: explanation
- Creating affirmation cards: explanation
- Designing a certificate: explanation
- Salt jar strategies: explanation


## Other ideas

- Ask the child to write a letter to himself/herself, describing the journey they have been on and what he/she has learnt about himself/herself. Agree with the child that you will send the letter to them at an unexpected time once the work is complete.
- Compose a rap or song with the young person: what they want to remember about the work.

## Case examples from NSPCC's Face to Face service



I was working with a teenage boy and he had been excluded from school so he was applying to start at college. Towards the end of our work together he made a collage of inspirational images that would help him to achieve in college. I gave him a lot of magazines to cut out pictures from – like Sunday magazines from the newspapers and car magazines. He seemed to really enjoy doing that.



The salt jar is a really nice ending to work. Every colour is a strategy they have used to move towards their preferred future.

One boy, who was in residential care at the time, was really surprised by how many layers there were. It was a visual of everything he had achieved.

One girl, who was aged 12, wanted this to be a 'jar of happiness'. She labelled the layers 'love', 'friendship', 'family' etc.

Another girl who liked baking did a 'recipe for success'. For example, 'a cup of love', 'a pinch of listening', 'you mix it all together'. She drew a picture of the recipe and took it with her as a reminder of our work together.

I've used 'make your own jigsaw puzzles' in sessions with children. Each piece of the jigsaw puzzle can represent something the young person has learnt about himself/ herself or positive strengths and strategies they have discovered. They might draw or paint on each puzzle piece.

This is something they have designed themselves, which they can be proud of; it's a way of celebrating their achievement. They can then keep it as a reminder of all the helpful things they've learnt.

## Tool: Cartoon strip

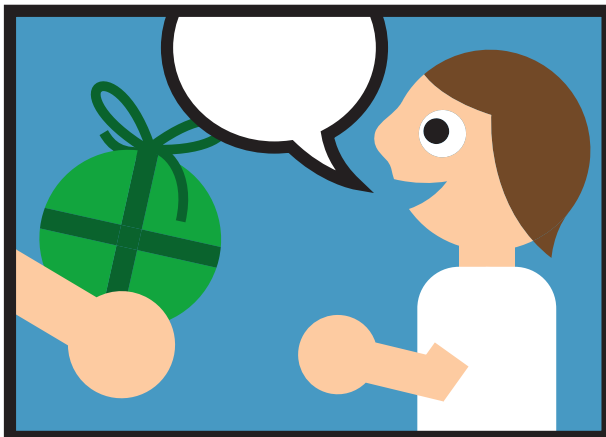
Cartoon strips could be used for a variety of purposes:

### Describing the child's preferred future:

- The cartoon strip could present a scenario in which the child's preferred future is happening. What would the child be doing at different points in the day? What would other people notice?

### Working towards endings:

- The child draws a cartoon strip to represent the work you have done together, or positive things they have learnt about themselves. This provides a visual reminder of the journey they have been on.
- The last box could represent where the child is now, or their hopes for the future.



## Activity: Making a vision board

When the child is coming towards the end of their work with you, you could spend time working with them on visualising a continuing positive future for himself/herself.

The vision board may represent the child taking part in activities they enjoy, or using the skills they have developed.

### A vision board can be created in the following ways:

- The child draws or paints their future on a canvas.
- The child makes a poster to hang on the back of their bedroom door
- The young person makes a collage using magazine cuttings and other art materials.

The images they create can provide a durable reminder of how they have already started moving toward their positive future, and the further steps they intend to make toward this future.



## Activity: Making a keepsake box

You could bring a simple box for the child or young person to decorate with paint, glitter, stickers, collage materials or lolly sticks. If you use lolly sticks, the child could draw something positive about himself/herself on each lolly stick and then use them to decorate the box.

Depending on the child's interests, this could be presented as a jewellery box, treasure chest or toolbox. The box can be filled with mementoes; cut outs, images of your work together and reminders of the things the child has learned about themselves in relation to working towards their preferred future.

### This may include:

- Drawings
- 'A letter to myself'
- Notes describing the child's strengths
- Strengths cards
- Affirmations e.g. 'I can stay calm' (see the Affirmations Cards activity below)

Once the work has ended, if the child wants a reminder of what they have learned they can return to their box, and they can also be encouraged to add to the box as they discover new ideas, skills and strategies.



## Activity: Creating affirmation cards

An 'affirmation' is a form of emotional support or encouragement. Affirmations might include phrases such as **'I am a good friend'**, **'I am a confident person'** and **'I can stay calm'**.

Affirmations should come from the child or young person. Therefore, within this process the practitioner can explore:

- Linking the child's achievements to their identity, for example what kind of person can do this/ what does this say about you?
- The practitioner can then work with the young person to agree affirmative statements about himself/herself.
- The practitioner can then print and laminate these statements so that the child or young person can subsequently remind themselves about their own discovered positive view of themselves.

Affirmation statements may also have been used as a tool within the process (often described as 'self talk'). In challenging situations, the child may have been able to do something differently because of these positive 'self talk' statements.

In agreement with the child or young person, these 'self talk' statements can be written or printed and laminated as a reminder.

Once your work with the young person has ended, affirmation cards can serve as a reminder of their personal strengths and how they can keep focused on moving toward their preferred future.



## Activity: Designing a certificate

When the work is drawing to a close, you could work with the child to design a certificate and present it to them at their last session. The child could decide:

- The achievements they like to see noted on the certificate
- How they would like to decorate the certificate
- Who they would like to have there when the certificate is presented to them

You could then laminate the certificate so that it is ready to be presented to them at their final session.



# 9

## Further resources



## Further resources

Books and articles about solution-focused practice  
Berg, I. K. & Steiner, S. (2003). Children's Solution Work. W.W. Norton Company Inc. USA

Berg, I.K. and de Shazer, S. (1993) Making numbers talk: language in therapy, in Friedman, S. (ed), The New Language of Change: Constructive Collaboration in Psychotherapy. New York: Guilford Press.

Dolan, Y.M. (2000) 'One Small Step: Moving Beyond Trauma and Therapy to a Life of Joy', Lincoln, NE: Authors Choice Press.

Ratner, H., George, E. and Iveson, C. (2012) Solution Focused Brief Therapy, 100 Key Points and Techniques. Hove, East Sussex: Routledge)

Milner, J. & Bateman, J. (2011). Working with Children and Teenagers Using Solution Focused Approaches. Jessica Kingsley Publishers. UK.

Shennan, G. (2014) Solution-Focused Practice: Effective Communication to Facilitate Change. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

Information about NSPCC's Face to Face service

Fernandes, P. (2014) Face to Face Service: Impact and Evidence Briefing. Interim Findings. London: NSPCC. <http://www.nspcc.org.uk/globalassets/documents/evaluation--of-services/face-to-face-interim-report.pdf>

Practice resources

Strengths cards:

<http://www.baaf.org.uk/bookshop/strength-cards>

<http://www.incentiveplus.co.uk/strength-cards>

<http://www.incentiveplus.co.uk/bear-cards>

Instructions for making an origami fortune teller:

<http://www.enchantedlearning.com/crafts/origami/fortuneteller/>

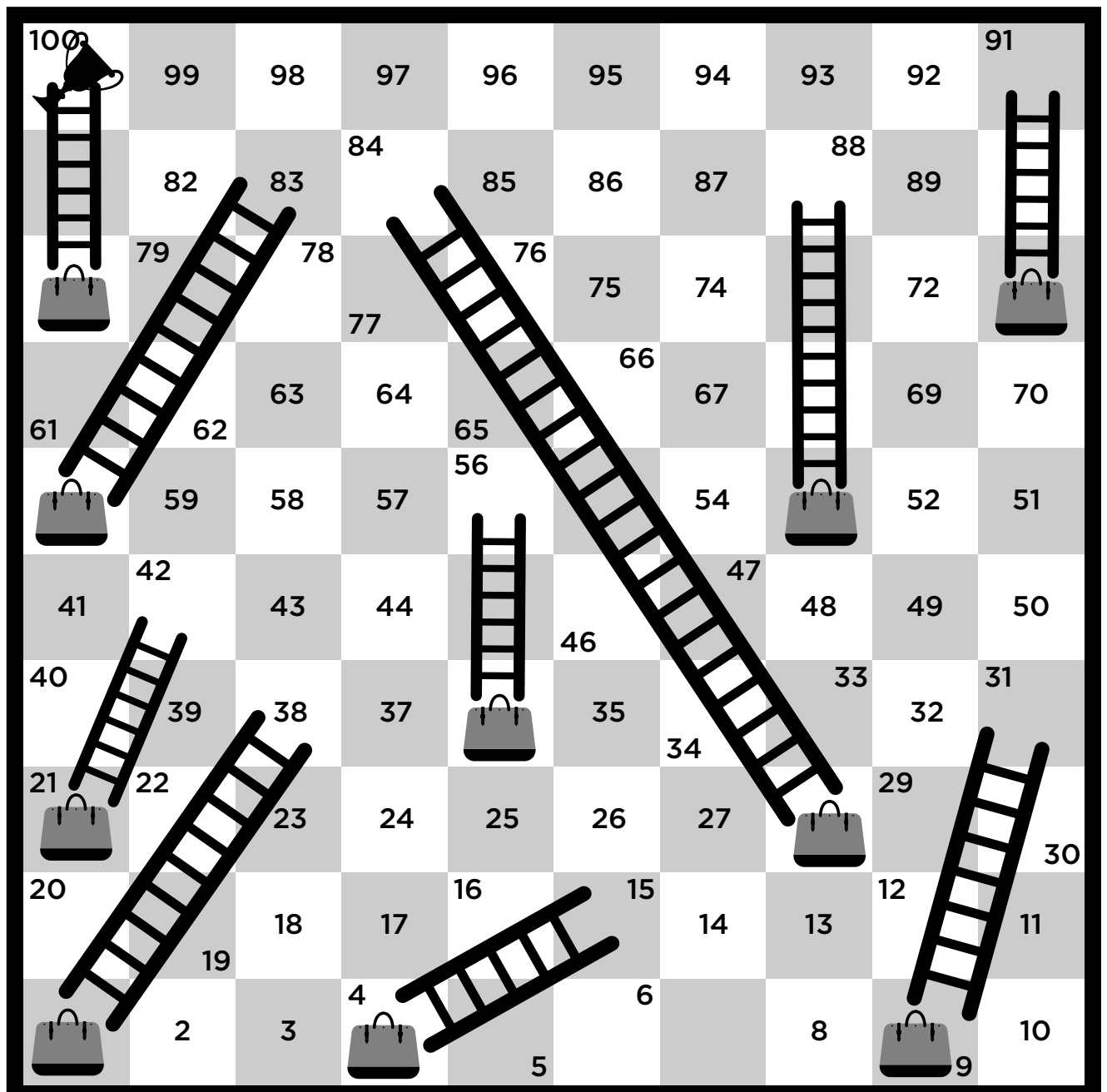
# 10

## **Appendix: Tools to use with children and young people**

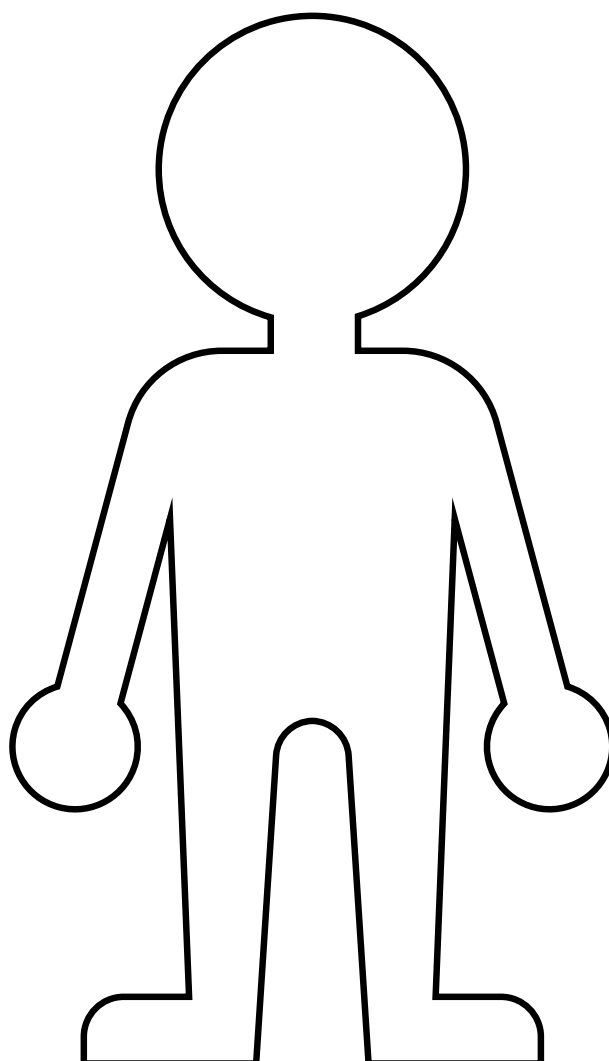
# My journey



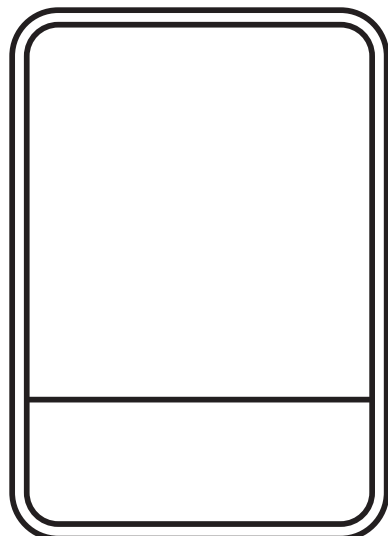
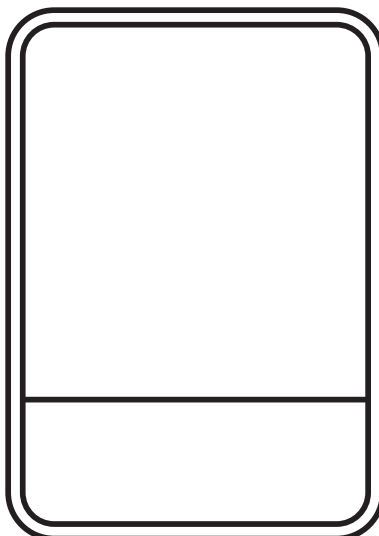
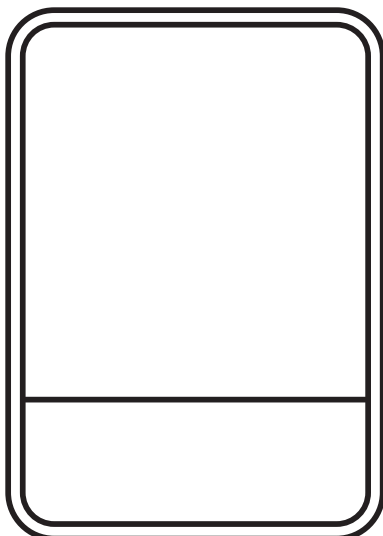
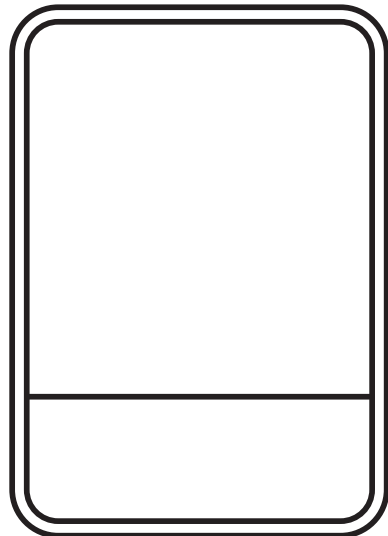
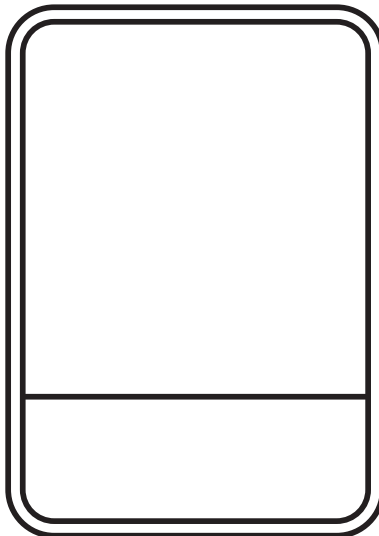
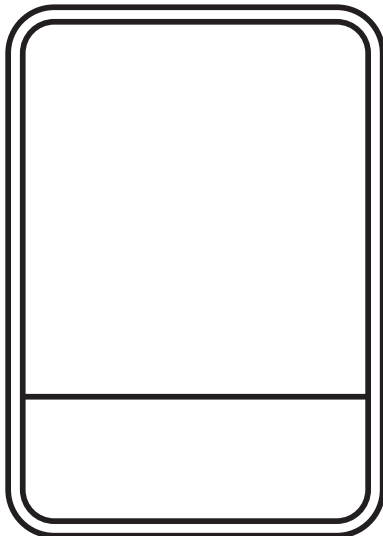
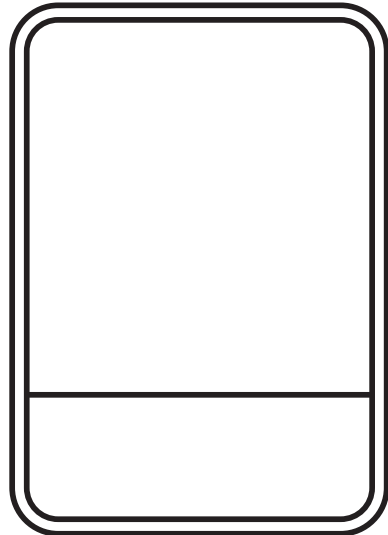
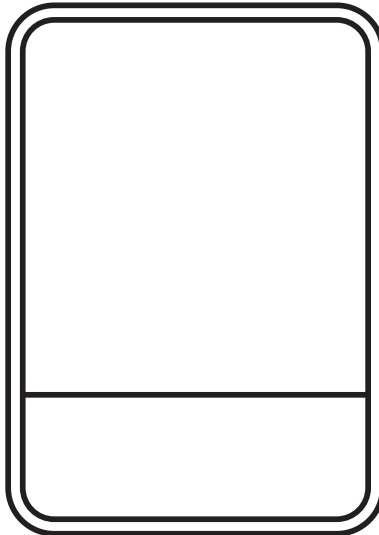
# Ladders and tool bags



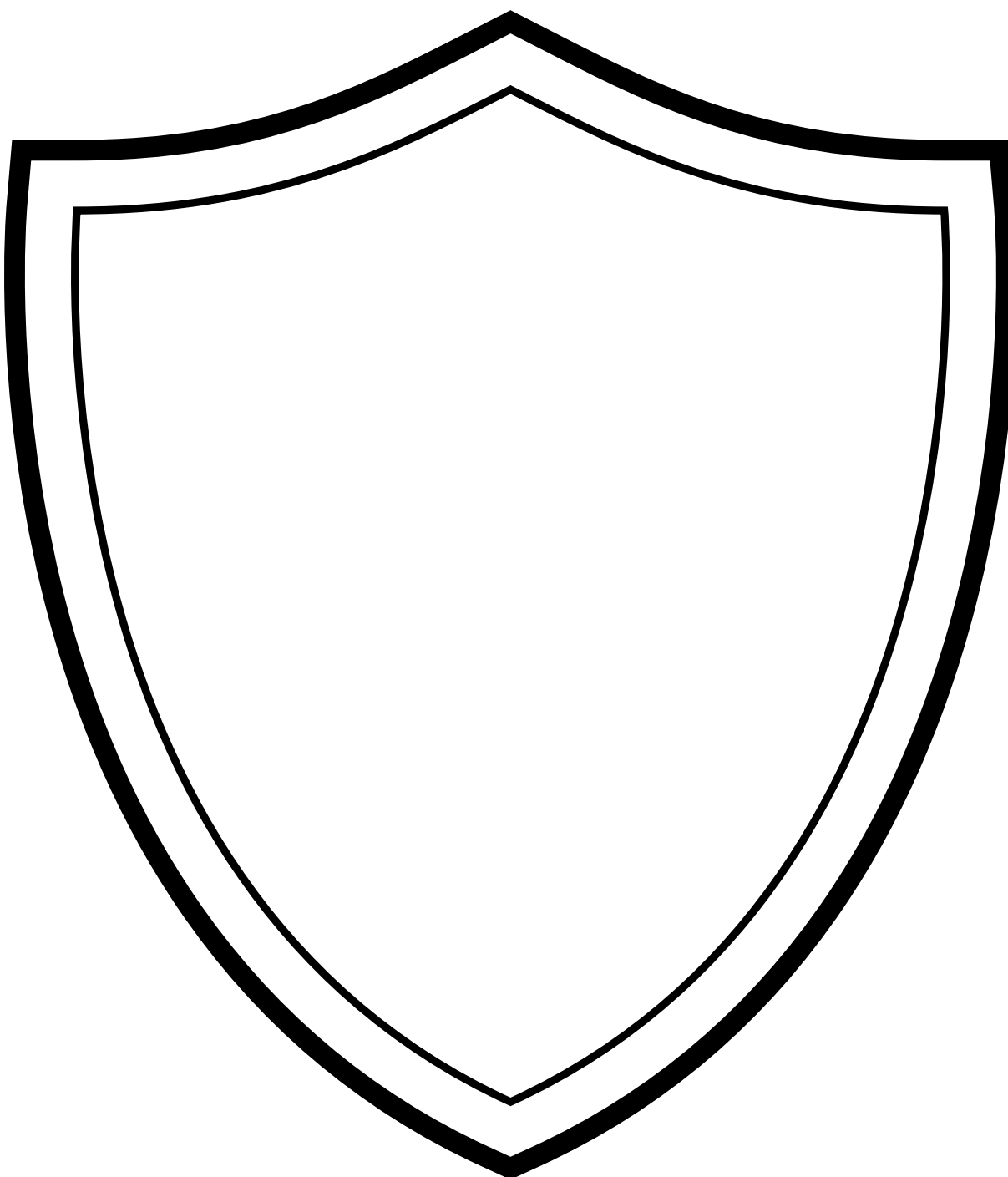
# My strengths



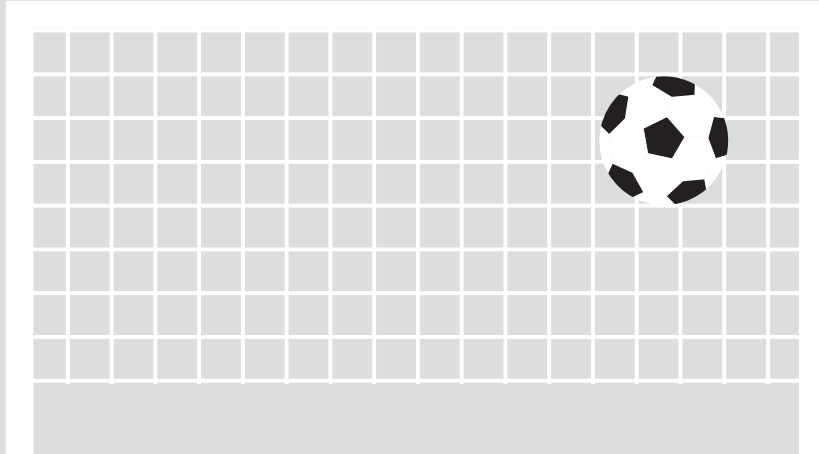
## Strengths cards



# My strengths shield



# Like scoring a goal!



Achieving something you want from our work together is like scoring a goal. People don't just talk about goals in football matches, but they have goals in life too.

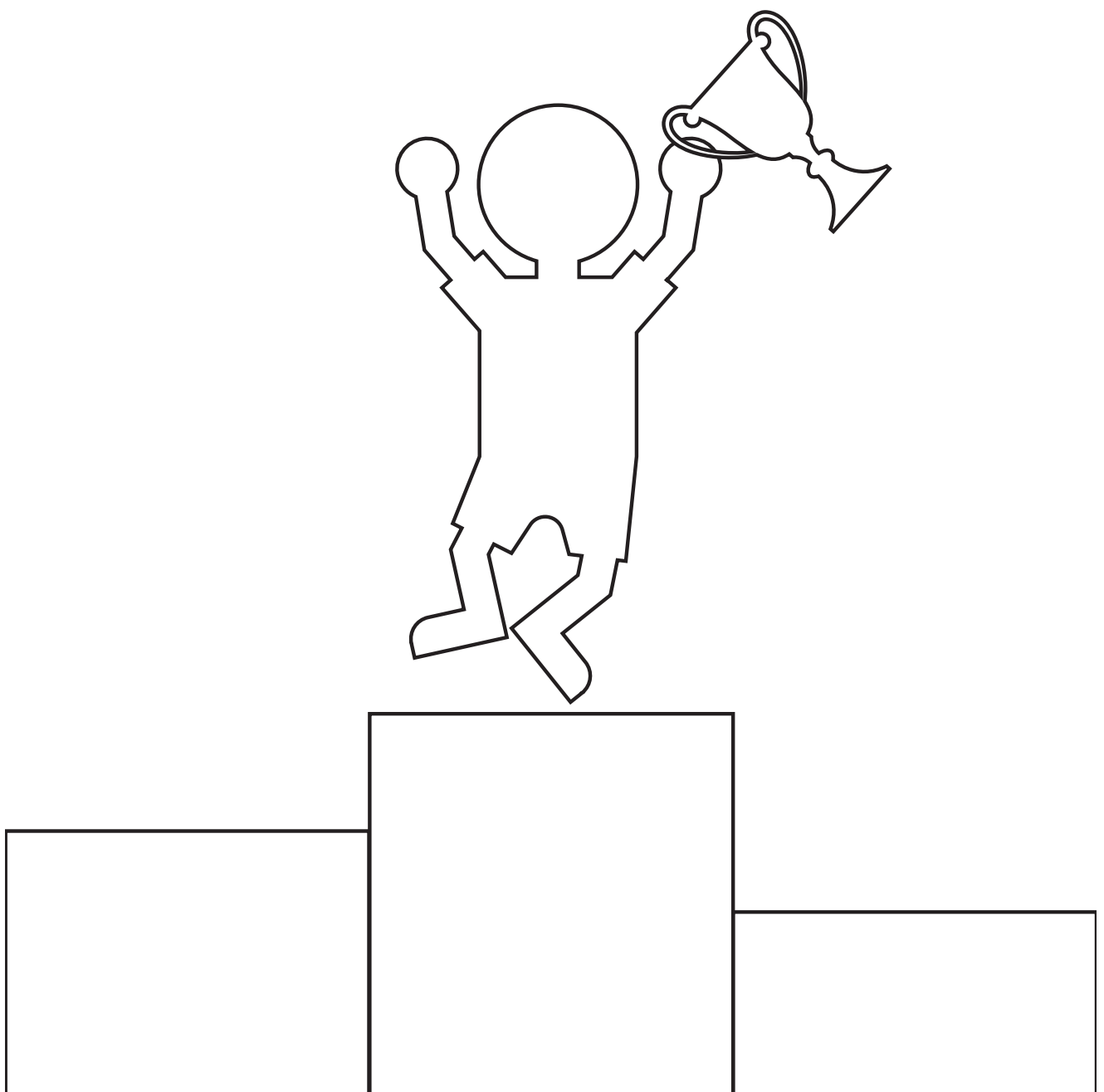
## A goal is...

- Something positive
- Something about me
- Something I want for myself
- Something I can achieve

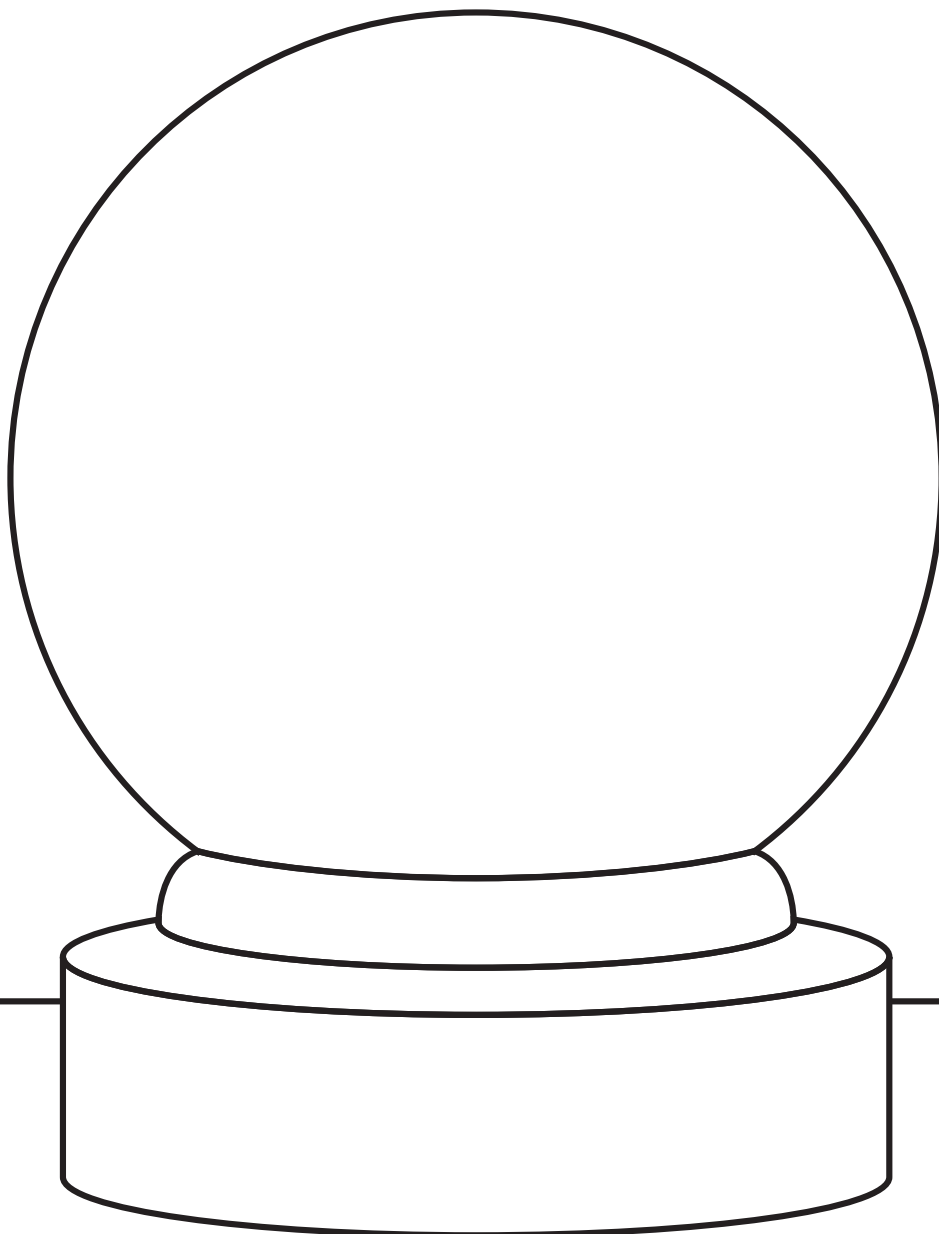
What is the goal you would like to work towards?



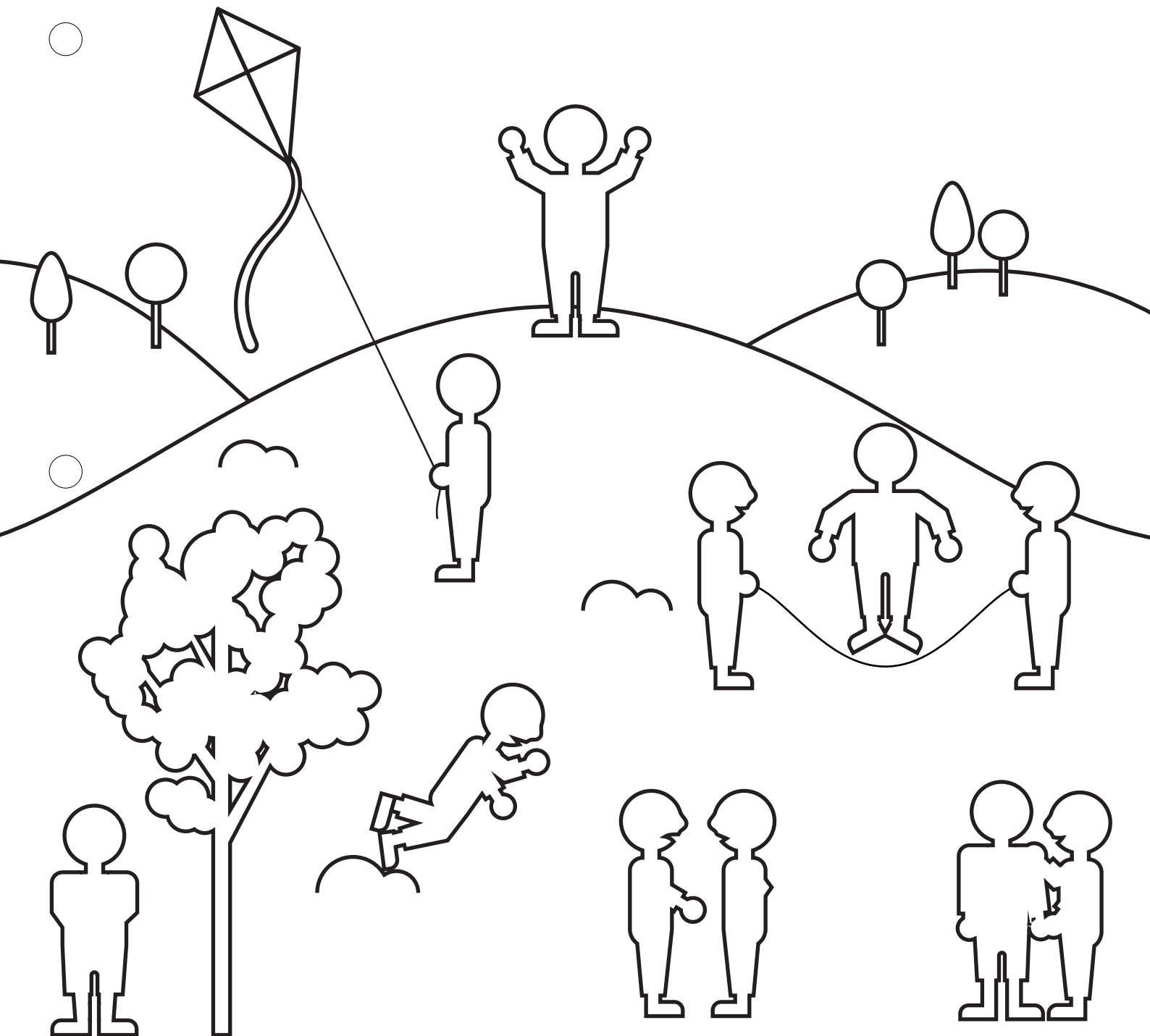
# My best hopes



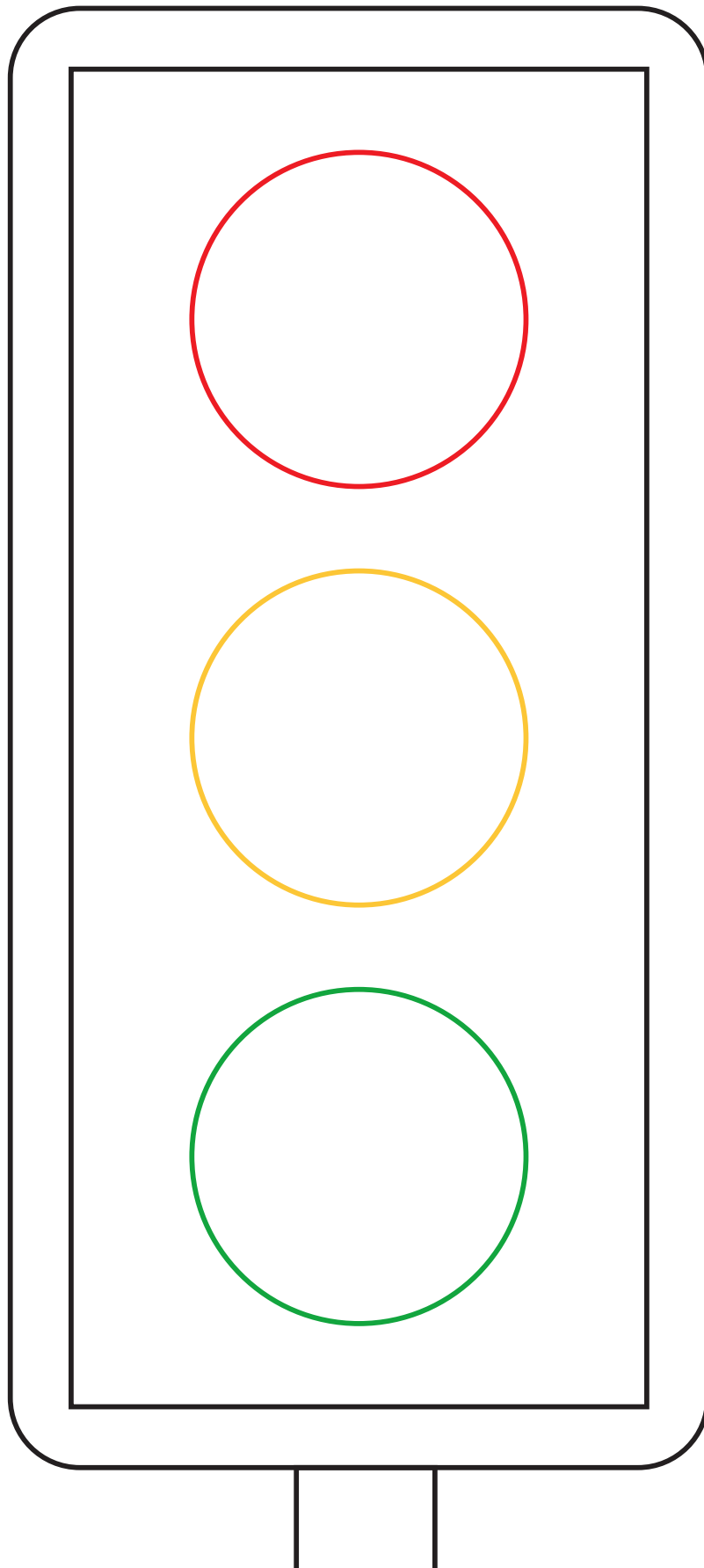
# My hopes



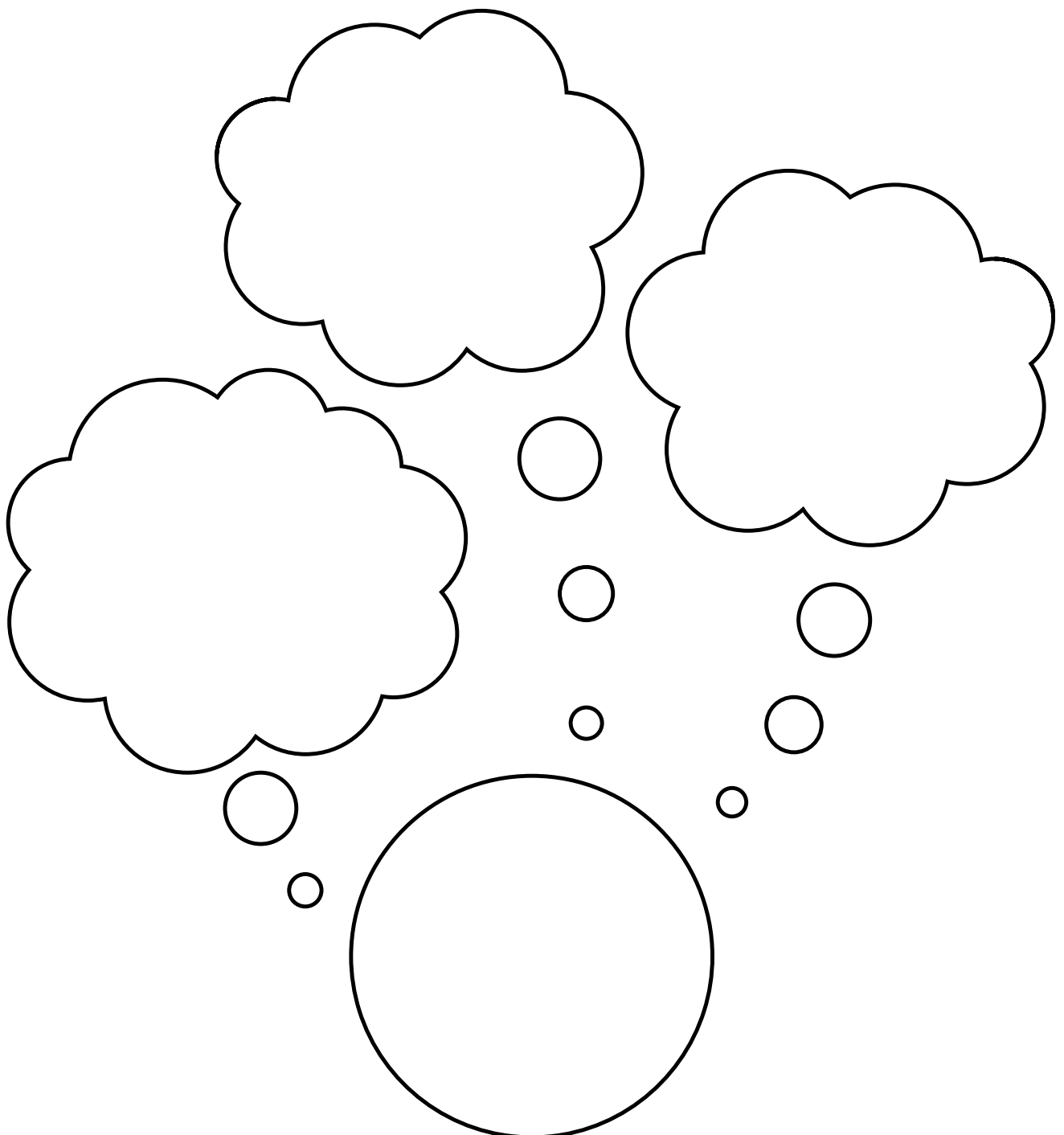
# Which one do I want to be me?



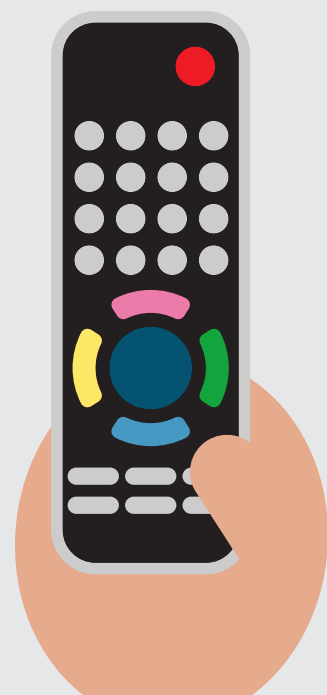
# Traffic lights



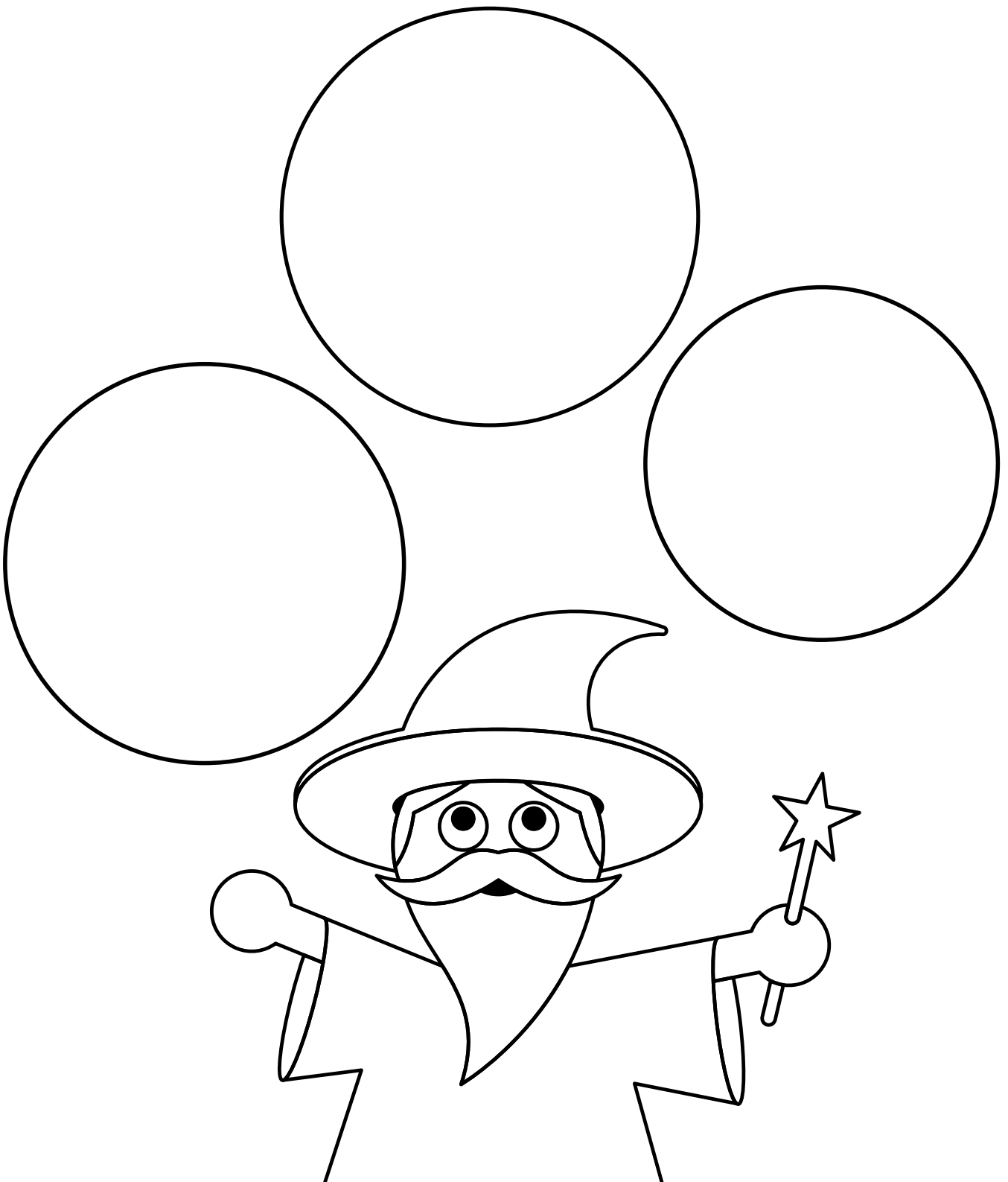
# My best hopes



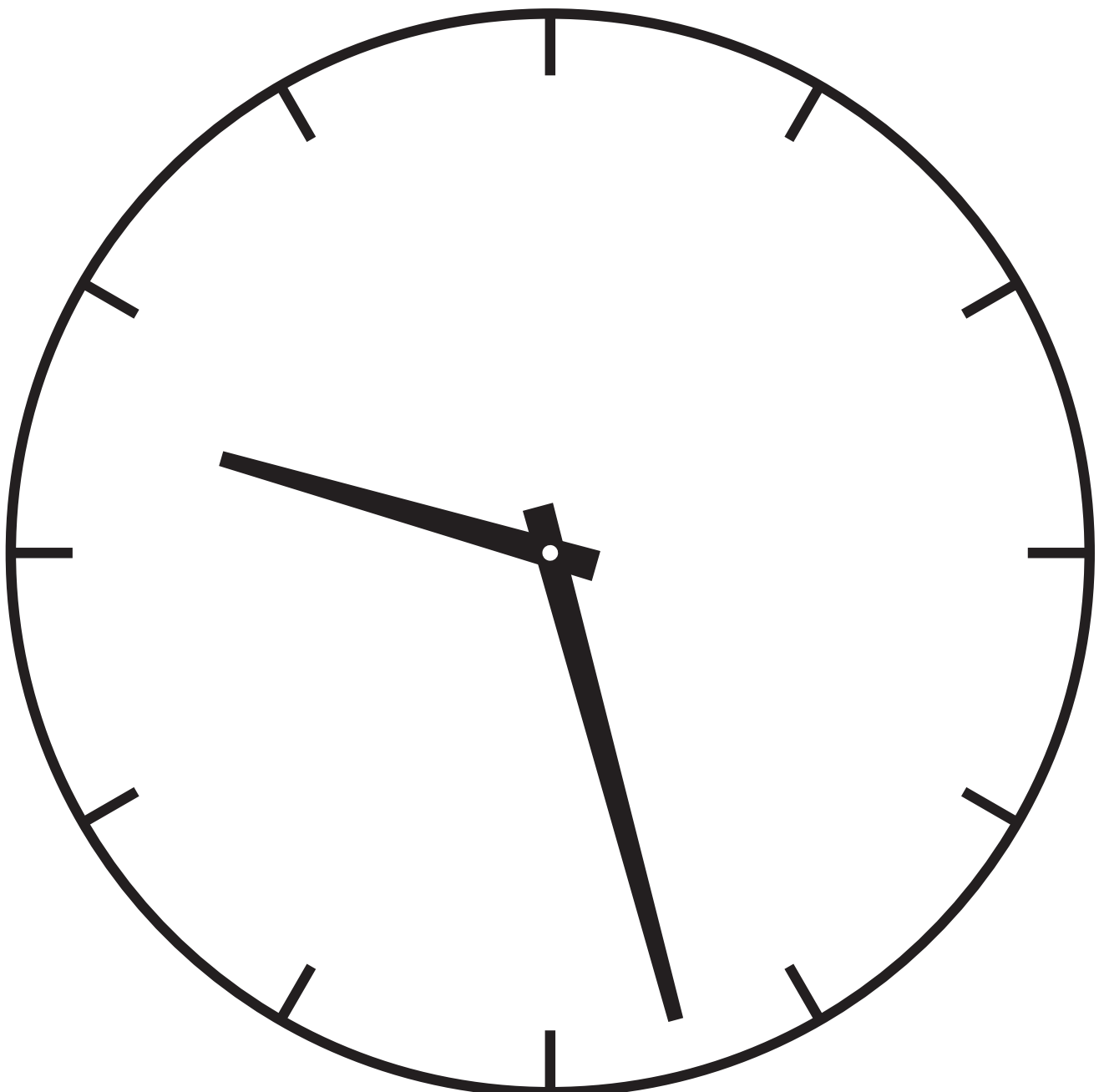
# Changing the channel



# Waving a magic wand

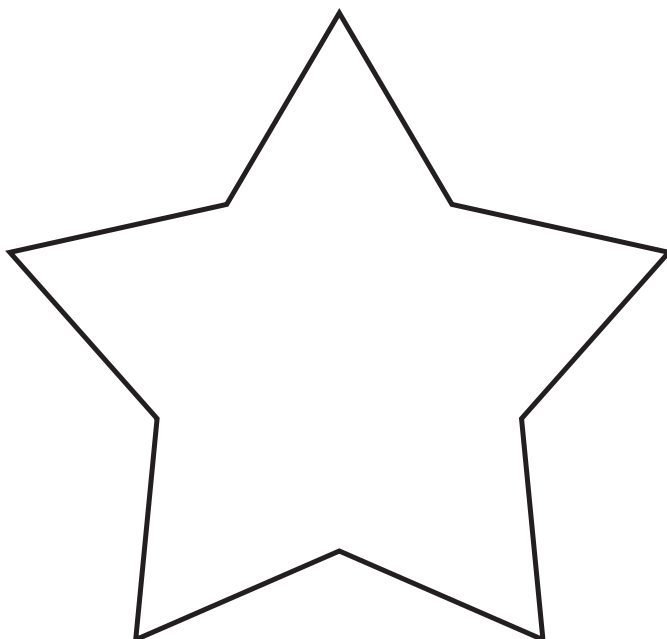
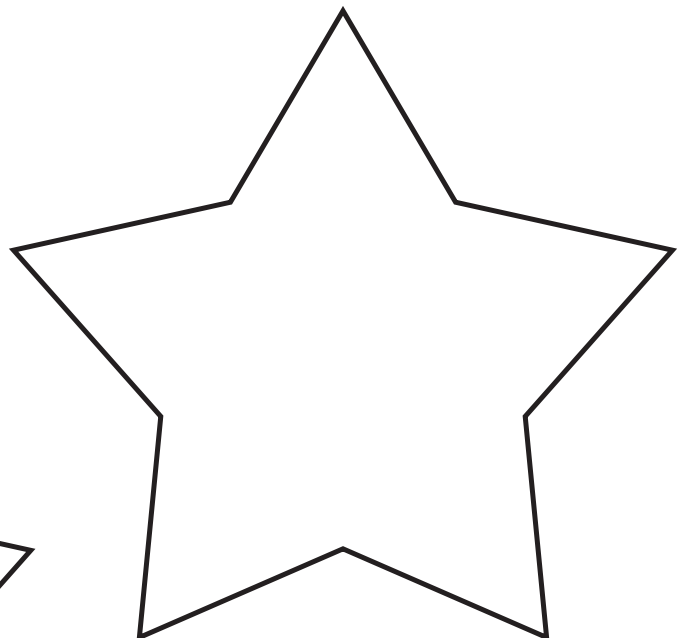
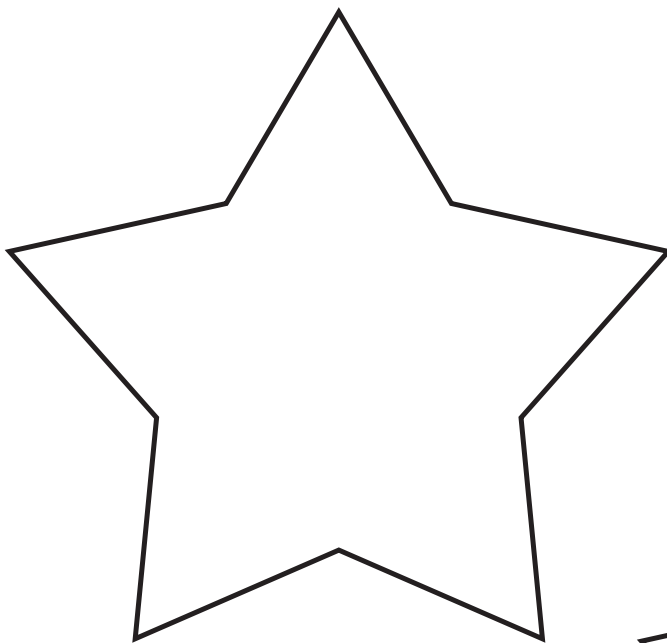


# The miracle day

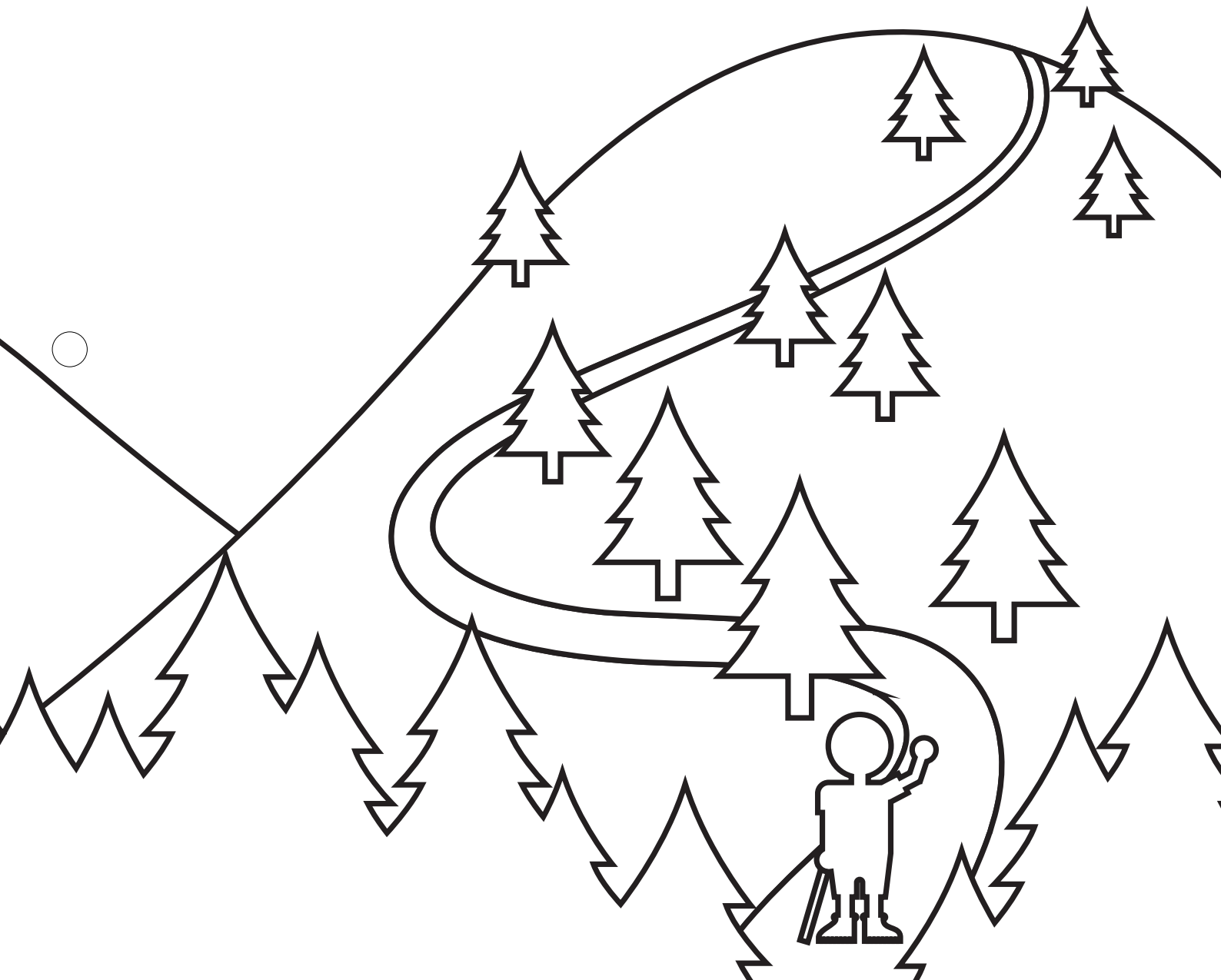




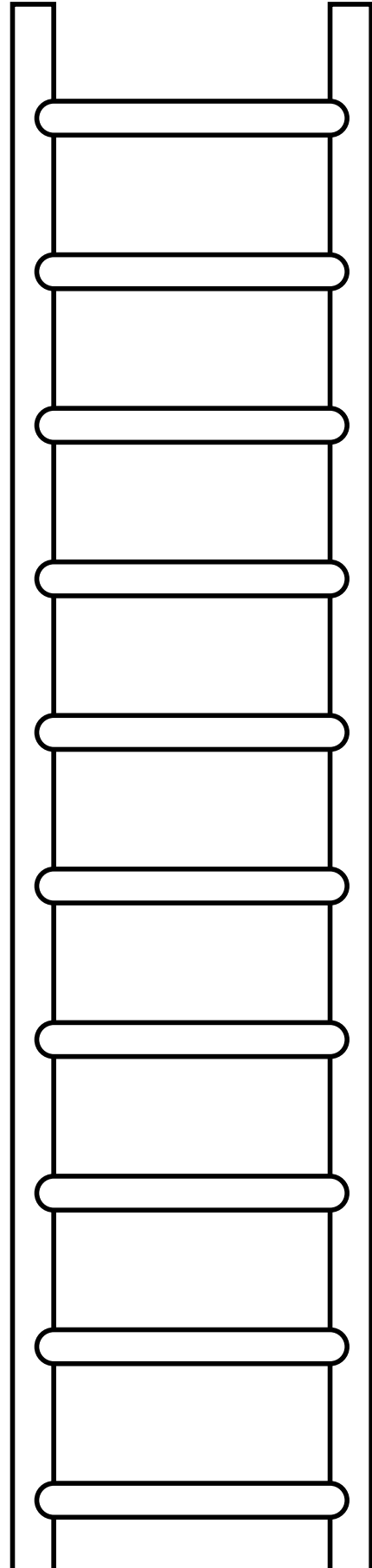
# Instances of my preferred future



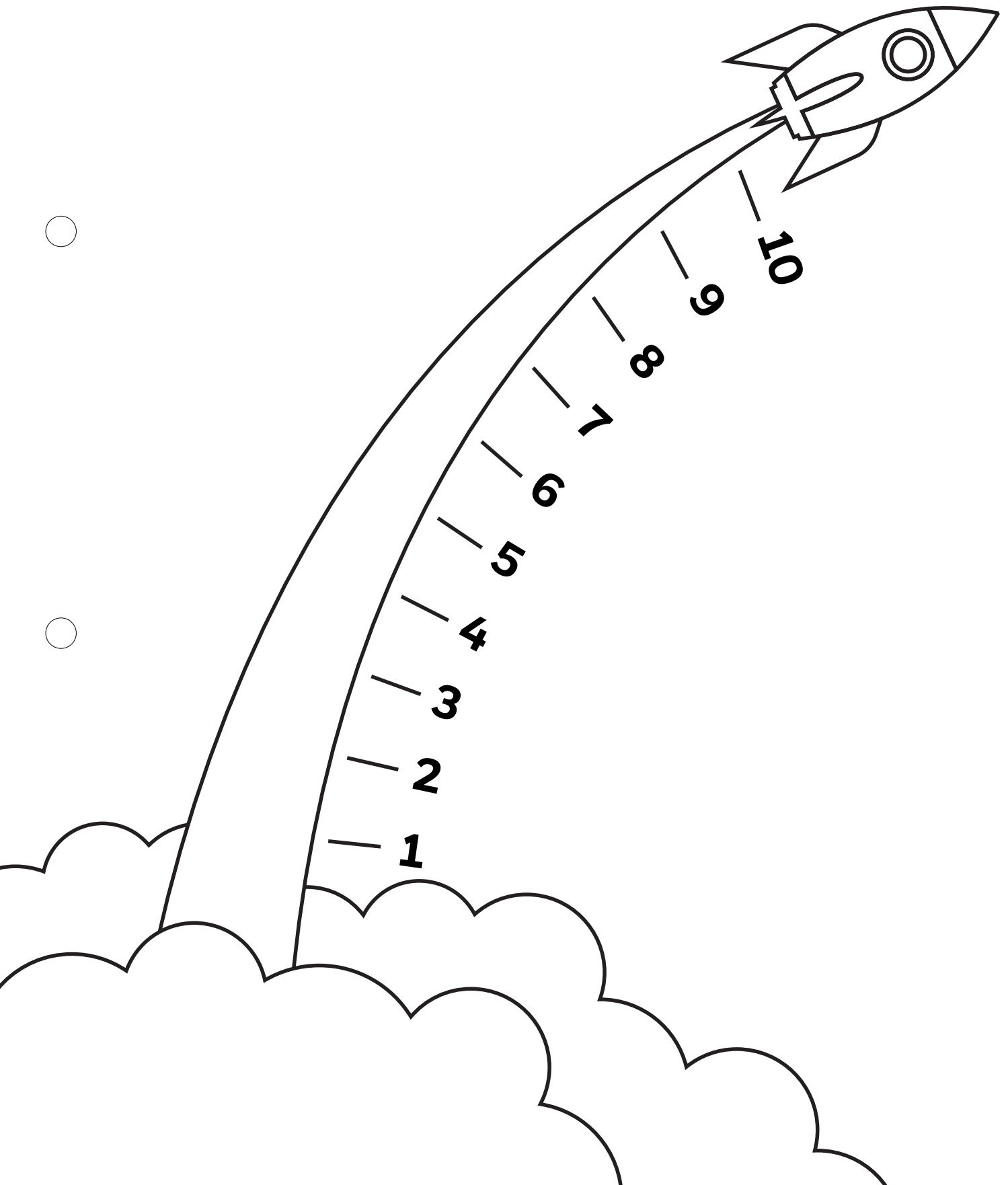
# Climbing a mountain



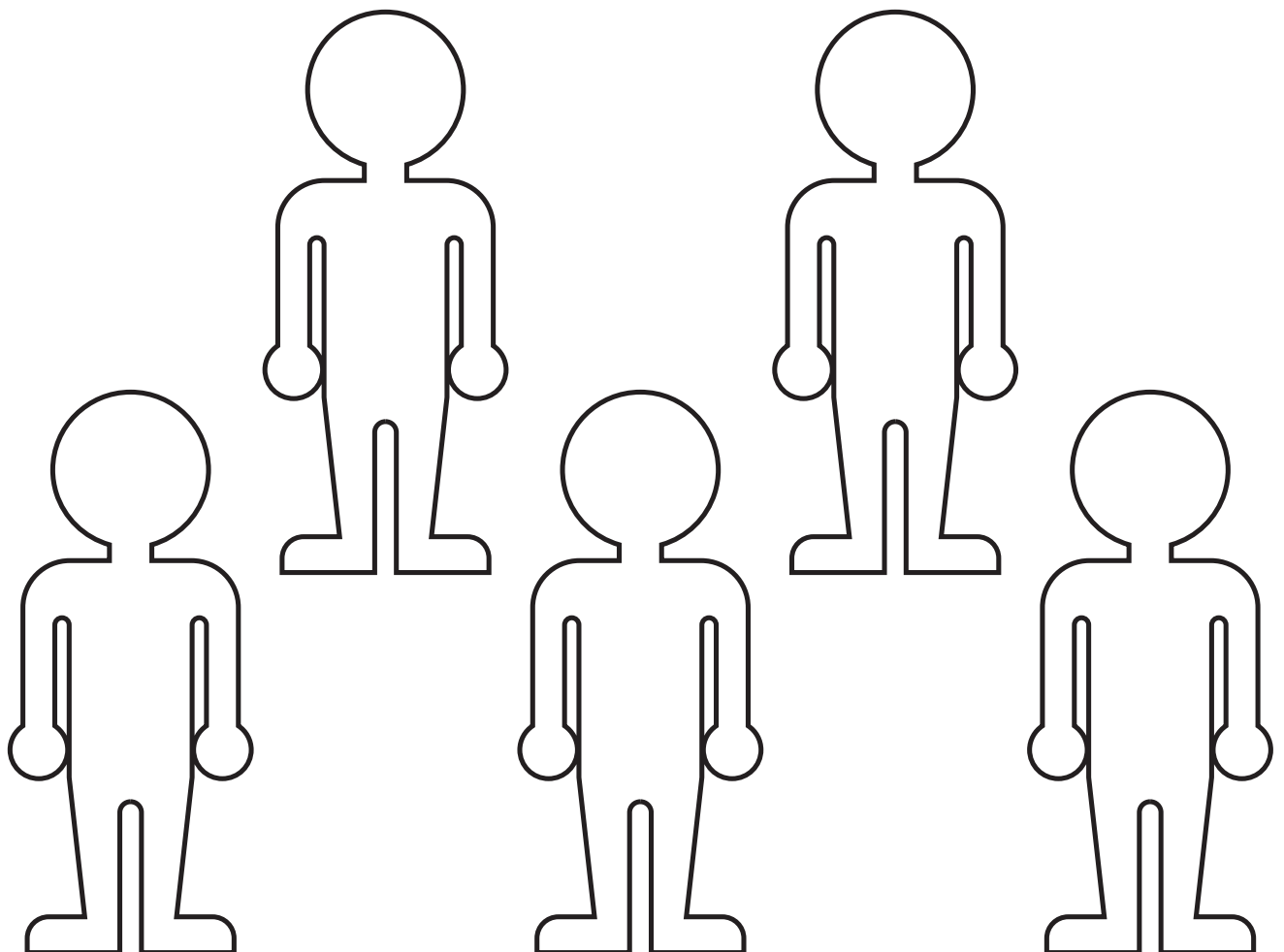
# Climbing a ladder



# Taking off



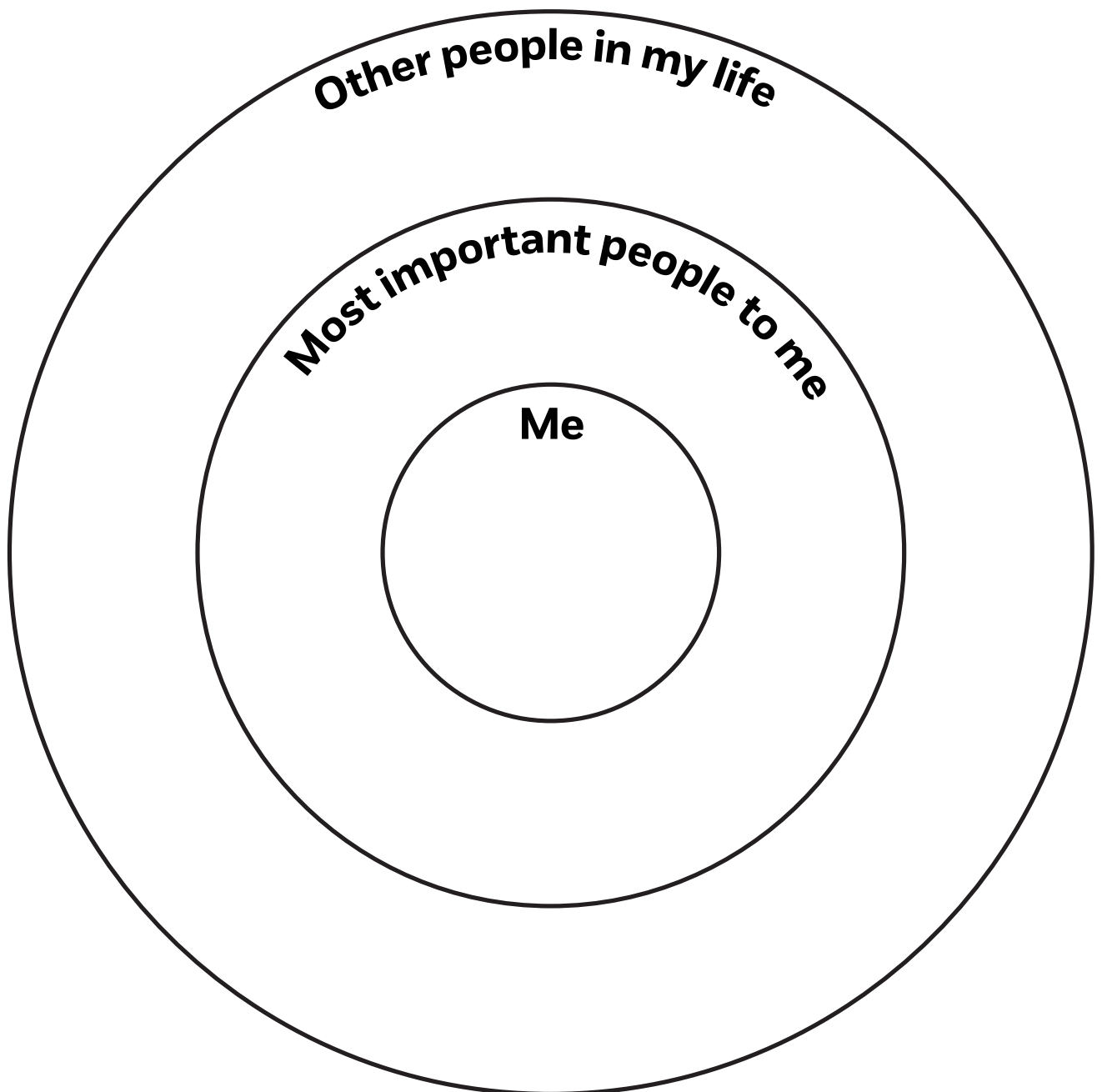
# My solution team



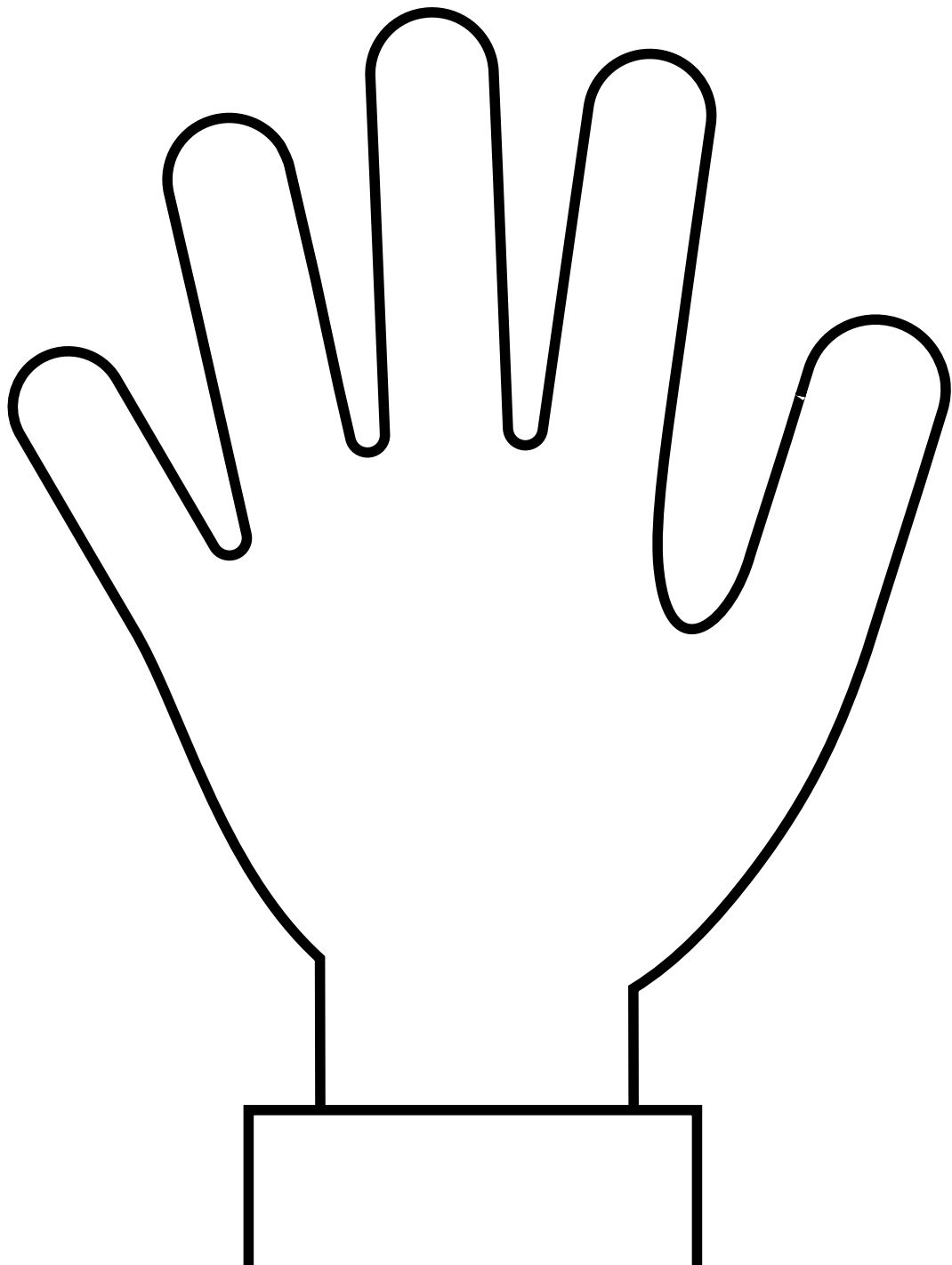
# Solutions check list

1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
7.		
8.		
9.		
10.		

# Who is important to me



# A helping hand





## Cartoon strip

